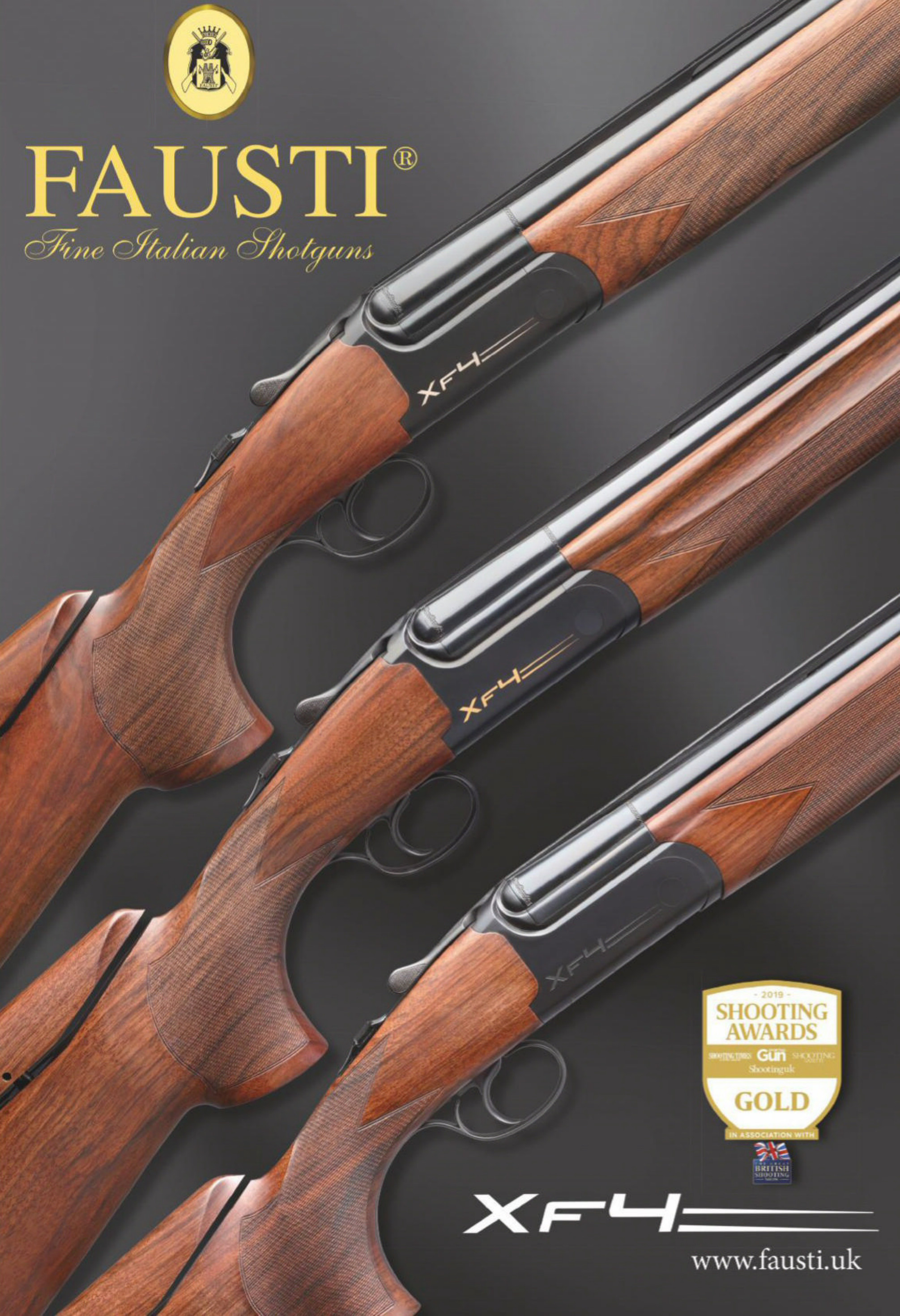




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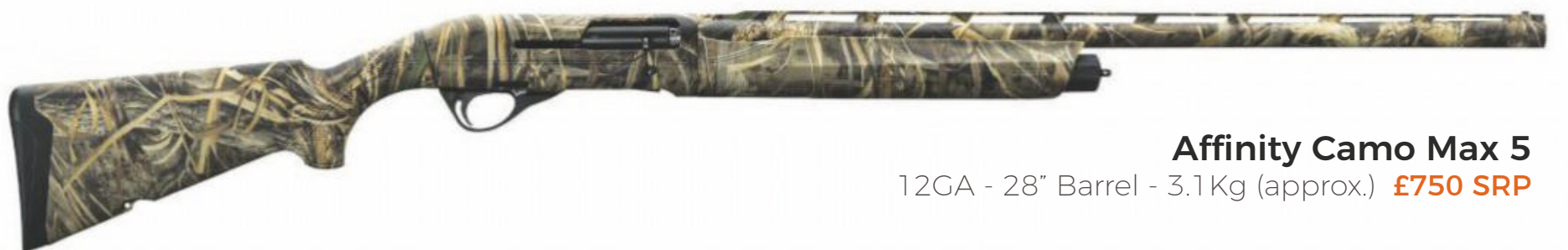
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DOG OF THE WEEK

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Oakley

Oakley is an 18-month-old rescue Labrador who is training his hardest to become a picking-up dog. He enjoys watching TV dramas after a long day but hasn't yet worked out how to turn off *Peppa Pig*.

Owned by Gemma Usher. Photographed by Matthew Nutt

SHOOTING TIMES

It's fieldcraft



Last Wednesday I made a flask of tea, packed a Bakewell tart and drove to Essex to shoot pigeons. After an hour of reconnaissance, we pitched our hide beneath a stand of firs in a far corner of a rape field, rigged up our flappers, plugged in two magnets and waited.

On arrival the field was alive with pigeons, but it soon became clear they were ambivalent about returning. Over the course of the day, a small number were seduced by the decoys but, as is often the case, I was enjoying the tart when they put in their appearances. The main issue seemed to be that we were too close to their roosting wood and that, as far as the eye could see, there were plenty of other feeding options.

Just before we called it a day, we thought we'd go and stand two fields away, beneath a hedge where a couple had flighted back to the wood. Over the next half hour, some 50 pigeons came low over the plough, requiring us to hide in a ditch and take them out in front like grouse as they flared.

Later, as I packed away a miscellany of expensive pigeon shooting kit, it struck me that you can spend all the money in the world but at the end of the day, fieldcraft puts birds in the bag.

Patrick Galbraith, Editor



Follow Patrick on Twitter
@paddygalbraith

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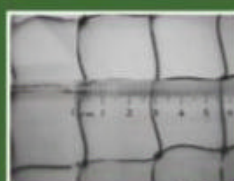
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Lesser black-backed gulls are one of the pest bird species that can be taken under general licence

Threat to general licences

A campaign group is challenging the legality of general licences, which allow for the control of pest bird species to protect crops and livestock

The general licences that allow for the shooting of pest bird species, including crows, feral pigeons, Canada geese and lesser black-backed gulls, are to be challenged in the courts by a campaign group.

Wild Justice, a private company set up by TV presenter Chris Packham, raptor blogger Dr Ruth Tingay and former RSPB conservation director Dr Mark Avery, has announced that it is raising funds to challenge the legality of the general licences in court.

The general licences are issued annually by Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage, Natural Resources Wales and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern

Ireland. They allow anyone to kill certain species of bird to protect crops and livestock, to prevent damage and disease and to protect the environment.

Announcing its intention to challenge the licences on the crowd-funding website CrowdJustice, Wild Justice said it “believes this system is unlawful despite the fact that

responsibility to satisfy itself that killing these birds is an appropriate last resort. However, in the general licences issued on 1 January 2019, Natural England ducks its responsibility and instead places the decision-making completely in the hands of the general licence user.”

Gamekeepers and pest controllers responded to

experienced land manager wrote: “If they are trying to make a splash it worked but at what cost to the taxpayer and the environment remains to be seen. Will the last curlew please turn out the lights.”

On the same day the challenge to the general licences was announced, the High Court ruled against Dr Avery and the RSPB in their challenge to Natural England’s brood management scheme for hen harriers. Dr Avery and the RSPB were represented by law firm Leigh Day, which controversially brought more than 200 cases in the High Court relating to the conduct of British soldiers in Iraq and which is acting as legal adviser to Wild Justice.

Matt Cross

“The cost to the environment remains to be seen. Will the last curlew please turn out the lights”

it has been in existence for decades and has ‘authorised’ the casual killing of millions of birds”. The statement continues: “We contend that it is the licensing authority’s (Natural England’s) legal

the news of the challenge with a mixture of anger and derision.

Commenting on the potential impact of the action on vulnerable bird populations, one

Woodcock's southern revival

Fears that the unusually dry summer of 2018 would lead to reduced woodcock numbers have been allayed as parts of southern England recorded above-average numbers.

Dr Andrew Hoodless, a woodcock expert from the GWCT, said: "It was good to see woodcock numbers bounce back quickly after the relatively poor season of 2017-18." He also praised shoots that waited until at least December to assess numbers before deciding on whether to have a day on the birds.

Dr Hoodless recently completed a woodcock tagging exercise in Cornwall, making 170 captures and ringing 145, which is around 40 more than last winter.

The GWCT believes that better spring conditions on the woodcock's main breeding grounds in Russia and Scandinavia may be responsible for



Parts of southern England saw above-average woodcock numbers

the recovery, allowing more chicks to survive after hatching.

However, while southern England has reported good numbers of woodcock, reports from Scotland are more mixed.

Dr Hoodless explained: "The contrast between north and south may reflect different winter weather conditions, but it seems likely that it also reflects the fates of different breeding

populations: with Scotland's wintering population consisting of a higher proportion of woodcock from Scandinavia rather than Russia."

Scandinavia had a hot, dry summer that would have caused a higher mortality rate, whereas central Russia missed the high temperatures recorded, resulting in regional differences in woodcock breeding success.

Fox plays chicken and loses

The 3,000 feathered residents of a Brittany henhouse turned the tables on a young fox that entered their coop looking for dinner — by mobbing the animal and pecking it to death.

The juvenile is thought to have been attacked by

the hens *en masse* after it entered the coop through an automatic trap door, which then trapped it inside.

"There was a herd instinct and they attacked him with their beaks," said Pascal Daniel, head of farming at agricultural school Le Gros

Chêne. "It had blows to its neck, blows from beaks."

The chickens are free-range and their coop is kept open during the day.

Shooting Times asked Liam Bell, chairman of the National Gamekeepers' Organisation (NGO), if he had come across a similar situation. He said: "That's a first. I've seen birds running after corvids and raptors but not after foxes."

Lindsay Waddell, a retired keeper, former chairman of the NGO and *Shooting Times* contributor, added: "I've seen lapwings and curlew mob a fox. A bird's instinct to protect its young is quite high. I've seen bantams with chicks attack dogs, and grouse will lure away large predators, such as dogs, with the 'broken wing' trick and then fly off. Grouse will also have a go at stoats and weasels."



The hens — not these ones — "ganged up" on the fox and killed it

Weekend Twitter poll

Have you ever bred a litter of puppies?

44% No

33% Yes

8% Too much hassle

15% I'd like to one day

follow us @shootingtimes

Respondents: 252

To do this week



GET SETT

Owners of Gordon

setters should put Sunday, 19 May in their diary because Gordon Castle is organising what will hopefully be the largest Gordon setter gathering ever.

The purpose of the event is to draw attention to the fact that the Gordon setter is at risk of disappearing. Indeed, the Kennel Club has described a decline of 60 per cent in breed registrations in Scotland as "deeply concerning".

Shooting Times spoke to working Gordon setter breeder Fran Toulson of Warrenfell kennels in County Durham about why numbers were in decline and whether shooters should consider the breed. She advised: "Spaniels and Labradors are, of course, more versatile — they are suitable for picking-up and shooting game birds all over the UK. With Gordons it is more limited; they are air-scenting dogs that set, flush the bird and then drop. They are not a picking-up dog and are really only used on grouse. That said, they make good family dogs if you don't live in a small house."

➔ Spread the word among other Gordon setter fans and get tickets to the event at po.st/Gordonsetters.



CONTROL

Make a start on Larsen

trapping to control magpies and carrion crows. Magpies have already started marking out their territories and will be followed by the crows. Identify individual territories and then place a Larsen trap as close as possible to the nesting site. When you have caught one or both of the pair then move on, so the trap can carry a larger area. Work done now will pay big dividends later on in the season.

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21-22 APRIL

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26 APRIL

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Devon
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conference.co.uk

28 APRIL

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bisleyshooting.co.uk

4-5 MAY

WHITFIELD CHARITY CLAY SHOOT

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Northumberland
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M. GORDON / ALAMY



Of the 58 hen harriers tagged, 72 per cent are thought to have been killed illegally over the study's 10-year duration

Hen harrier deaths “higher on moors”

Country groups condemn illegal persecution as a study shows harriers are far more likely to die on grouse moors

A study by an international team of scientists has found evidence of illegal persecution of hen harriers on grouse moors in northern England.

The study, which was welcomed by BASC and the Countryside Alliance, used data from satellite tags to determine whether hen harriers were more likely to die on grouse moors than on other types of habitat.

the most likely reason for the tags to fail suddenly was that the birds had been killed illegally.

The scientists examined how likely it was for a hen harrier to die on a grouse moor compared with other habitat types. They found that hen harriers were significantly more likely to die on grouse moors in the north of England than on other types of habitat.

times more likely to die than in areas where no land was managed for grouse shooting.

The scientists also pointed out that only 17 per cent of hen harriers in England survive their first year of life compared with 36 per cent in mainland Scotland.

Countryside organisations welcomed the study. Caroline Bedell, BASC's executive director of conservation, said: “We are grateful that this research has been carried out. Satellite tags are a tool in the fight against raptor persecution. We have to make sure there is no place left for criminals to hide.”

The Countryside Alliance's Tim Bonner added: “There can be no space for the illegal persecution of any species, and we welcome studies that further our understanding of how best to counter that, and improve the conservation status of the hen harrier.

Matt Cross

“We have to make sure there is no place left for criminals to hide”

Scientists examined the fates of 58 satellite-tagged hen harriers over 10 years and found that for 72 per cent of them there were reasons to believe they had been killed illegally. Three of these birds were found and their bodies examined. In the remaining cases the tags stopped functioning with no explanation. The researchers concluded that

The study factored in the popularity of grouse moors as hen harrier habitat by not simply counting how many harriers died, but by looking at the percentage of harriers on and off grouse moors that died. They found that, in areas where 50 per cent or more of the land was managed for grouse shooting, a hen harrier was 10

Deer poaching on the rise

Police in Lincolnshire and its surrounding counties are noticing a rise in nocturnal deer-poaching activity.

It is thought that dry ground, which allows dogs to go into the fields, combined with the large group sizes of deer, could be behind the rise.

Shooting Times spoke to PC Nick Willey, wildlife and rural crime officer at Lincolnshire Police, who advised: "There are two types of deer poacher: gangs who will poach the deer for the venison; and those who are just happy to run dogs at night on anything that moves — mainly deer, but sometimes badgers or foxes. They have large bull breed dogs crossed with longdogs, giving them dogs with great running ability and the head and neck of a bull breed, which can bring down large deer."

Social media also encourages poaching, according to PC Willey. He added: "Offenders will take



The police have urged people to report incidents of poaching

pictures of themselves with dead animals, including deer. They relish the fact they can post imagery of kills and of driving across farmland. Phones are a great tool for organising their activities, which is why we always seize them from offenders."

To counter the activity, Lincolnshire Police is running night operations in conjunction with local gamekeepers, farm

managers and other police forces further afield.

PC Willey continued: "In these times of austerity and increased pressures on the police service it is really important that people report this type of criminality. We need evidence of these issues in order to get extra resources and equipment."

Shooting Times contacted the CLA to discuss the effect on local landowners. CLA East's regional surveyor, Claire Wright, responded: "We have certainly had members report an increase in poaching activity. Those involved in this activity have no regard whatsoever for the animals and will not think twice about damaging crops, farmland and hedges while chasing deer."

➔ *The National Wildlife Crime Unit's Project Poacher app is a quick way to report poaching incidents. Find out more at po.st/ProjectPoacher.*

NEWS IN BRIEF



Speedier firearms certificate service

Shooters have praised the efficiency of an online system introduced by several police forces to speed up the processing of firearms certificate variations.

Lincolnshire reader Mathew Leyman said: "I have just had cause to request a variation on my firearms certificate from Lincolnshire Police and used the new online portal. The service was great. My certificate was returned to me, variation complete, six days later."

Three other forces — Thames Valley, Metropolitan and Hampshire — have introduced an online licensing system recently and all have reduced the time taken to process applications.

SNH hires island mink trapper

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has recruited a mink trapper for the islands of Lewis and Harris, where the animals have been preying on local wildlife, including the eggs of vulnerable wading birds.

Mink established themselves on the islands after escaping from fur farms

in the 1950s. A successful cull programme, launched in 2001, has caught up to 2,200 mink and by 2018 had achieved its aim, after trapping numbers fell to just two non-breeding females and males in the 18 months previously.

Mink, however, continue to be spotted. A spokesman for

SNH said the project is ongoing and that, while only one mink has been caught in 2019, SNH continues to monitor traps to maximise opportunities for complete eradication.

The islands' native wildlife has already benefited from the eradication programme. David Maclennan, SNH area manager for Argyll and the Outer Hebrides, told *Shooting Times*: "We're delighted that terns, waders, divers and ducks are coming back to their native Outer Hebrides. Invasive species are one of the greatest threats to the beauty and variety of our nature, and this demonstrates the success of a complex and challenging 18-year programme to eradicate the American mink and its devastating effect on native wildlife."



The American mink has had a devastating effect on native wildlife

Medical marijuana and firearms

The US state of Ohio has banned ownership and purchase of firearms by registered users of medical marijuana. Using or possessing marijuana and firearms at the same time is illegal.

There is a question whether the ban will have implications for UK shooters, as a recent change in UK law has made it legal for doctors to prescribe medicinal cannabis products to some patients.

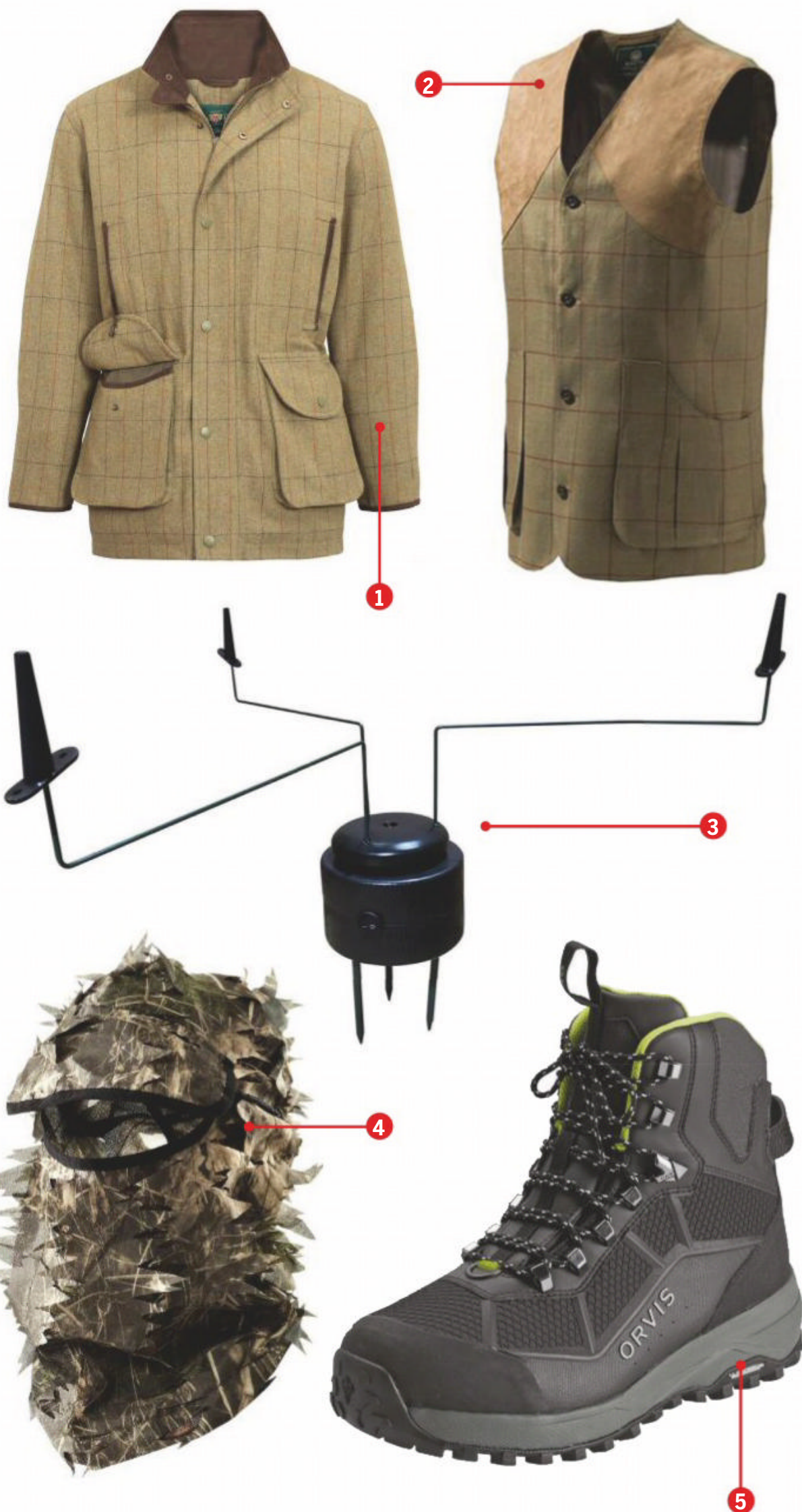
Professor Andrew Rice, a specialist in pain research at Imperial College and a keen shooter, advised: "The circumstances under which a doctor can recommend medicinal cannabis are very limited. There is a risk of psychosis in people who use it and for that reason it is entirely justified that people who use cannabis don't hold firearms."



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Shooting Times is the official weekly journal
of BASC and the CPSC
BASC Marford Mill, Rossett LL12 0HL
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CPSC PO Box 750, Woking, GU24 0YU
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This week's cover image was
captured by David Kjaer

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Our great sport has no boundaries

My son James (*right*) is seven years old and has autism. Many people with this condition don't like loud noise or getting mucky so you can imagine my concern when he said he wanted to come shooting with me. After much discussion with my wife, I decided I would take him and see how he got on. We arrived at our local shoot and, with James wearing ear defenders and waterproofs, we began on the duck drive where I was picking-up. It's a walk one, stand one and when a Gun shot a duck, I sent my dog Max for it.

As he came back, another Gun shot one so I started to walk and point Max in the right direction to retrieve it. I looked around to see where Max had gone and there he was sitting next to James, with James holding the mallard that had smeared blood over his top. My first thought was, he's going to have a meltdown, but then I saw the massive smile on his face.

He carried on through the day with no worries at all. He



fell over a few times but just got up and said "I'm OK, Daddy". Since then he has not missed a Saturday with us.

He absolutely loves our sport, whatever the weather.

Everyone who has met James has been amazed by how he has come on, and it just goes to show our sport has no boundaries.

R. Kirkham, by email

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KNEE-JERK REACTION

The shootings in New Zealand carried out by a right-wing terrorist are unsurprisingly resulting in a tightening of firearms legislation. It can be argued that there is no legitimate sporting use for assault rifles but, as we have seen so often over here, the actions of one deranged person result in all legitimate gun owners being punished for a crime they had nothing to do with. That is wrong.

How long will it be, I wonder, before politicians and the anti-gun lobby here use this tragedy

as a flimsy excuse to call for further tightening of our laws?

M. Boxall, Northumberland

The Editor responds: *What happened in New Zealand was horrific and there is no reason for an ordinary person to own an assault rifle. There are a multitude of sporting reasons for which a person should be allowed to possess firearms. It is imperative that those who are part of that group communicate the many benefits of fieldsports and target rifle and clay shooting to negate the possibility of legitimate gun ownership being complicated or removed for political gain.*

ONE BIG WORM

Matt Cross gives all the scientific reasons why the game season should be extended ("Season creep" and our sport's future, 27 February). He points out the potential "can of worms" in doing so. There is one really big worm in that particular can. Those who understand the legal issues tell me that any change to the game season would have to be approved by Parliament. This in turn would offer the opportunity for the antis to add as many restrictions to shooting as possible. Do we really want to risk that?

C. Norris, by email

TIPS FOR RATTERS

I love the photo of the bedraggled but proud Bonny with her rat (*It turns full-grown men into little kids*, 13 March). Please could Bonny give my spaniel some tips on how to negotiate entry into the house when in such a state?

E. Gallia, Dorset

PUBLIC SERVANTS

I read with great amusement I. Barnett's comments about how we are all on the same side (*Letters*, 27 February). Does Mr Barnett give the postman a round of applause for a perfectly executed delivery through the letterbox? Or serenade the refuse collectors after a flawless turn of the bin? Police officers are public servants and some are good, some are bad. It is only right and just that Bill Harriman uncovers the truth.

If it weren't for the likes of Mr Harriman and all his hard work, we would now probably have a £1,000 certificate fee and a six-month psychological evaluation.

My only criticism is that while I enjoy Mr Harriman's *Gunroom* column greatly, would it be possible to test-fire the antique firearms and share some ballistic results?

M. Radcliffe, by email

OLD CHESTNUT

I agree with some of M. Hardy's points regarding lack of ear defenders, holding cartridges, bad stance, gun-mount and so on (*Letters*, 13 March). However, the old "shoot with both eyes open" chestnut is, in the majority of cases, twaddle.

By all means shoot with both eyes open — but only if the hand and eye dominance of the student match. To make a right-handed left-eye dominant student shoot with both eyes open is ludicrous to say the least.

F. McIntosh, CPSA instructor, by email



After some experimentation — and regrettably some burned offerings — Matt Still's woodpigeon sausage rolls were a triumph

WOODPIGEON SAUSAGE ROLLS

I've been experimenting in the kitchen with game meats and inventing some different dishes. One Sunday, my wife and I were walking around a local farmers' market and I spotted a stall selling game meats. Within minutes the man running the stall had £10 of my hard-earned money and I rushed home to cook.

At home, with all the ingredients I needed — and my wife looking worried at the thought of the mess I was

going to make — I began to work. My first attempt at deep-fried squirrel was a burned disaster, so into the bin it went.

After a quick tidy up, I started to make woodpigeon sausages rolls. About an hour later, once they finished cooking and had cooled slightly, my wife and I were both pleasantly surprised at the flavour.

I've experimented with more variations and at each new creation made the delight increased. I even attempted squirrel again.

M. Still, Kent

WHY THE .410 IS A MARMITE GUN

Using a .410 on game is like Marmite; you either thoroughly enjoy it or are totally against it. I have seen some very good Shots using .410s; many a youngster shoot their first live quarry with their .410 and the smiles are never forgotten.

I see no difference in shooting at game past the bore's effective range, whether it be a .410 or a 12-bore, shooting at extreme pheasants 60 to 70 yards with 34in barrels and 36g or 40g of No.3 or No.4 shot. A .410 can

make early-season shooting more enjoyable, especially on flat ground. Shooting 25- to 30-yard pheasants and partridges is sporting and challenging with a .410. I would not get the satisfaction with a 12-bore and would, four times out of five, not shoot at those same birds. Game also needs to be fit for the table; it is not just a target. I see too much pillow-casing by some Guns.

I will look forward to my .410 days next season. As a parting shot, why do slaughtermen prefer to shoot cows with a .410 rather than a 12-bore?

N. Baughan, Buckinghamshire

NEXT WEEK IN SHOOTING TIMES

INTO THE WOODS

The joys of a spring walkabout after pigeons and rabbits.



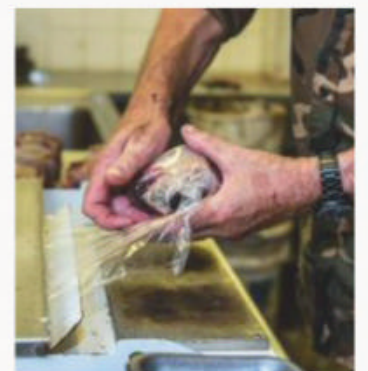
GAME CHANGER

Are pheasants ruining our countryside or are such claims balderdash?



TRADING UP

How can shoots get more money for their game?



LIFE LESSONS

Teaching your puppy to sit and stay.



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“The wildlife of today is not ours to dispose of as we please. We have it in trust. We must account for it to those who come after.” King George VI

WhatsApp? Lots of pigeons, that's what

By harnessing a 21st-century platform, a historic estate has a ready pool of shooters to help with pest control, as Tim Maddams discovers

It was one of those days when you set off on a long road journey and immediately discover two things. First, the main road you wish to use is closed. Secondly, there is a storm with a name raging, which everyone else knew was coming but you were clueless about until you started noticing the trampolines and dustbins hurtling across the countryside.

I should probably have given up, turned around and gone home, and apologised to the man I was supposed to meet. But I am made of sterner stuff and after a seven-hour drive in hideous weather, I arrived in deepest Lincolnshire, stressed and exhausted.

I was there to visit the Revesby estate by kind invitation from James Waller-Davies. "Ah, so you are a Welshman," I said when he introduced himself on the phone. But I was wrong; in spite of the name, James is a Lincolnshire man through and through. He is so proud of his

county that he wanted to show me round. He also wanted to explain how he came to be a member of a select bunch of rough shooters who have come to be known as the Revetonians.

So it was that I found myself in a wet and windy farmyard, quickly changing into my pigeon-shooting gear in the back of the van on a Sunday evening in early March.

Pigeons and the pub

The plan was simple. Meet a few of the guys who shoot on the estate, head out to bag a few pigeons at roost, then retreat to the pub for a few drops of the local brew. The following day James was to give me a guided tour of the estate, after a briefing by the estate management team. The guided tour would be made with shotguns, of course, just in case a few more pigeons decided to put in an appearance.

Having changed and been given a home-made pigeon and black pudding sausage bap, plus a flask

of hot coffee, I made my way into the woods where various of the other Revetonians were already gathered; they had obviously heard about both the storm and the traffic. I hate roost-shooting pigeons when I haven't had a chance to do any reconnaissance and, true to form, everywhere I decided to stand was the wrong spot.

Miraculously, though, I managed a couple of crossers in the gale and a few of the other Guns had lots of shooting, as evidenced by the reports from around the wood. James managed to bag a few but we were all put to shame by Ed, who bagged 18. Then we went back to the Red Lion for tea and medals. I always think that if a pub manages to be busy on a Sunday evening, you know it is place worth drinking in.

As Neil, Ed, Tom, James and I set the world to rights, one thing became clear: everyone has a lot of time for the Revesby estate. I went to bed that evening looking forward to hearing more about it.

"The end of the shoot left Revesby with a problem; it needed people to control pests such as pigeons"



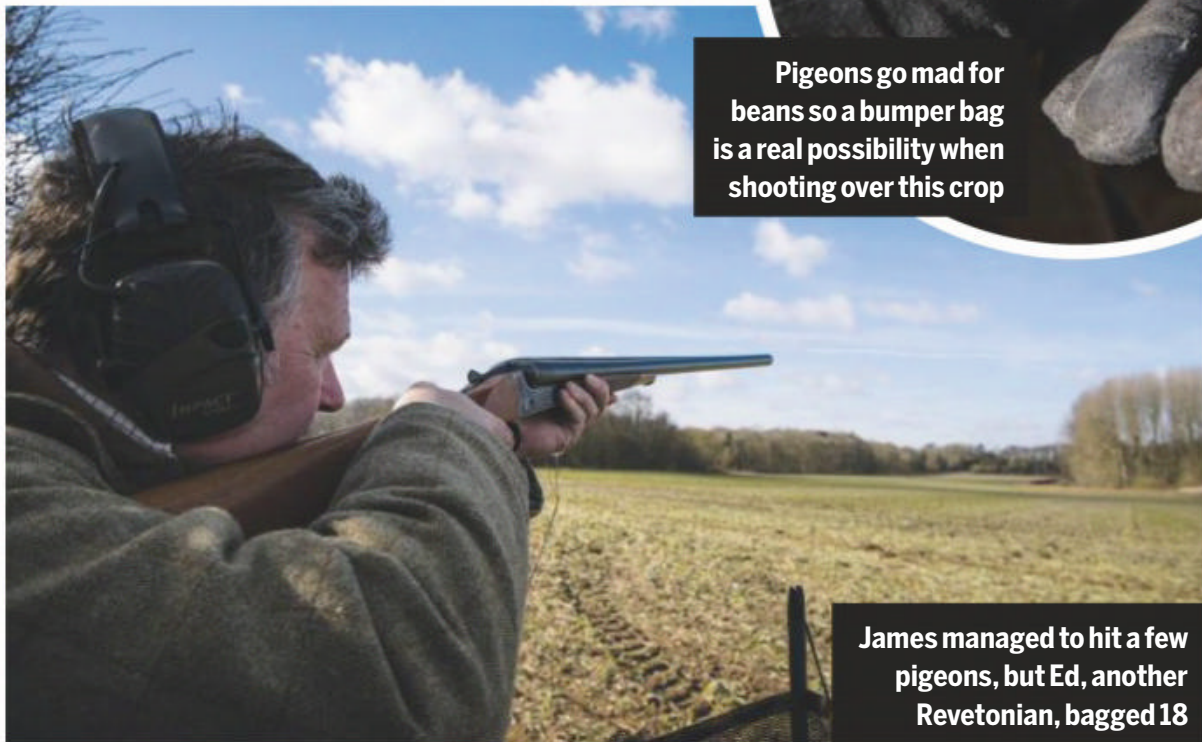
Pigeon shooting



James Waller-Davies, a member of the select bunch of rough shooters known as the Revetonians, gets set up



Pigeons go mad for beans so a bumper bag is a real possibility when shooting over this crop



James managed to hit a few pigeons, but Ed, another Revetonian, bagged 18

After breakfast the following morning, Peter Wiggins-Davies, the managing director, revealed that there has been a settlement on the ground since the year 1080. In 1143 a Cistercian monastery was founded by William de Roumare, Earl of Lincoln, which was later dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539 during the dissolution of the monasteries.

In the family

Revesby has been in Peter Wiggins-Davies's family for 300 years.

Within the ring-fenced 6,320 acres, the estate operates 12 enterprises, including arable farming, fisheries and green energy projects.

The pheasant shoot was terminated five years ago but the estate believes that having shooting on the ground is a real asset and that is where the Revetonians come in. The end of the pheasant shoot left Revesby with a problem; first, it needed people to control the wild deer, foxes, squirrels and pigeons, and secondly, people to help keep an eye on the land.

Readers will appreciate the useful network of known locals whom shooting brings; trusted eyes on the ground who will report to a gamekeeper or farm manager if any issues arise.

Peter turned to a 21st-century platform to tap into this rural



James and Tim Maddams
build the pigeon hide

“Free shooting for the Gun, reliable eyes on the ground for the estate – it is a brilliant solution”

network and thus solve his problem. A WhatsApp (like text messaging) group was set up and a system developed: those wishing to shoot at Revesby have to be nominated by someone known to the estate; they must live within 15 miles of the estate office; be fully insured; put in a minimum number of hours and report any shooting success via the group.

This allows the estate to keep an eye on pests and know who is on the land and when. Certain hotspots can be highlighted to the farm manager or estate team and vice versa. If pigeons are hammering a certain patch of rape or drilling then the message will go out on the group and a Revetonian will be despatched to deal with the problem.

Sense of community

Free shooting for the Gun, reliable eyes on the ground for the estate – it is a brilliant solution that works well and has developed into a social circle too. Many members of the group are employees of the estate or one of its contractors or tenants. There is a real sense of ownership and community; for once, technology seems to be bringing people together.

As the briefing concluded, James was alerted via the WhatsApp group to a hotspot for pigeons – they were taking advantage of a bean drilling. This was promising news as pigeons go mad for beans. Sure enough, the pigeons were where we were told they would be but unfortunately they were in massive flocks unsuitable for shooting.



Tim didn't have much luck with his positioning but still managed a couple of crossers in the gale

A few odd ones and twos did put in an appearance and some of these were added to the bag. It certainly wasn't a red-letter day but there was something lovely about the simplicity of setting out with a gun and a pocketful of cartridges.

All too soon, it was time for me to dash back to the road for another long drive. As I set off, I was filled with a sense of excitement and faith for the future. Here was a way for technology and a positive attitude to link the estate seamlessly with its people and this feedback loop was self-perpetuating, the results tremendous and growing.

I would like to think this model could be replicated across the country as it can be tricky to find access to private land for a spot of crop protection and supper gathering. Landowners are rightly nervous about how and when they allow people on to the land. I have often heard a pigeon shooter lament that “gone are the days you could knock on a farmer's door and they would likely send you straight off to shoot a few pigeons or rabbits with their blessing”. I have found farmers and landowners to be quite practical

in the matter; get to know them, show them you are safe and trustworthy and they are likely to offer you access.

Clever technology

But the Revesby system is something else. With the complexity of livestock movements, forestry work and arable operations, things could quickly become problematic without the application of a little clever technology.

My only hesitation would be that perhaps from a pigeon shooter's point of view – I am certainly no expert on that front – this system could present problems with planning. If, say, a few members popped off for a little flightline shooting the day before you have planned and performed your recon for a day's decoying, it could well change the pigeons' behaviour. This would cause big problems controlling decent numbers.

However, I suspect this is all carefully worked out via individuals in the group. It is a smart system from a forward-thinking estate. I hope to return in the summer for another look, hopefully without the gale-force winds and road closures.



A WhatsApp message alerted the group to a bean drilling where the pigeons were taking full advantage

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An ecstasy of fumbling

Evicting grey squirrels from their dreys with poles is one of the finest, not to mention most competitive, of sports says James Fisher

One of the most damning indictments of London living is how those who work there flee it so determinedly on Friday nights. Normal, nice people become animals: bloodthirsty, pushy, hurried and devoid of all manners. Within five minutes of arriving at Victoria station I'd had my water bottle slapped out of my hand and been bullied through the automatic ticket barrier.

However, I soon found four seats for my companions and me. After a quick gin and tonic from a tin, peace returned while the Friday night "full moon" passed and the werewolf commuters were returned to normality. Some of them, at least.

I was heading to Kent to take on the most nimble and cunning immigrant, the North American grey squirrel, a species that has long outstayed its visa. Once at our destination, we ate a hearty meal, had a few drinks and

Various "beats" of woodland had been divvied up and drawn between the three teams at random. My host was quietly confident: "Our main wood is absolutely full to bursting with them. I was down there this morning and one practically landed on my head." We set off towards the wood, bouncing around the back of a Series 1 Land Rover. The hunt was on.

Focus and frenzy

Drey poking is a curious sport. About this time last year, I wrote a piece for this magazine about it (*Poles apart*, 18 April 2018). I arrogantly claimed that it is the finest country pursuit, and I stand by that. The mixture of expectation and elation, focus and frenzy simply cannot be beaten.

Storm Erik's winds had proved advantageous as the greys had decided to stay home rather than take on the gusty howls. Drey after drey was proving fruitful, with an

"Persistence is key, as drey poking is a pursuit with many peaks and troughs"

discussed tactics, heading to bed at 11pm for an 8am start. The farmhouse swayed throughout the night as Storm Erik raged.

We were in three teams but, while the manpower was equal, the firepower was not. My Silver Pigeon, the ideal sporting all-rounder, was made to look hilariously feeble when compared with some of the firearms on parade. The estate workers did not come unprepared. Semi-automatics, some camouflaged, others matte and black, were unsheathed and loaded up. My companion, a former soldier, commented: "The last time I saw one of those, we were clearing rooms in Basra."

early poke revealing the much sought after "multi ball" as four inhabitants exploded out like the points of a compass. Only one survived.

It sounds easy but the grey squirrel is a fast, small foe that can move effortlessly in three dimensions – the woodcock of the mammalian world. One poke was particularly challenging. The squirrel leapt out of its drey and went spiraling almost directly upwards; the initial volley missed. The panic set in.

"He's over there! He's over there, you complete idiots! Reload and get after him!" howled our host as he ran after the squirrel, clutching nothing but a set of rapidly collapsing poles. ➔





Drey after drey proved fruitful, with an early poke producing four inhabitants; only one survived



Image © Richard Faulks

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A member of the opposing team was perched at the top of a tree



We gave chase, trying to reload and keep our eyes on the squirrel, which caused a scene that can only be described by Wilfred Owen's eternal phrase "an ecstasy of fumbling". Into another drey he went, having survived a second volley of rounds. This time, however, we were waiting and the kill was completed.

So it went on, with varied success in each drey, until we reconvened with the other teams for lunch and compared notes. Somehow, in the face of awesome firepower and local knowledge, we were ahead. We had a tally of 12 squirrels, the professionals had 10, with the final team of tweed-clad clowns on six. Our lunch of oxtail stew had never tasted so sweet. Could it possibly be that the plucky newcomers would defeat the locals on their home turf?

Raining squirrels

Fate had other ideas. Any squirrel-attracting lotion applied in the morning had washed off and the afternoon began as a contrast, with a dearth of squirrels. The dog started to get depressed. It is never nice to look into the eyes of a morose Jack Russell, especially when, as far as she was concerned, it had been raining squirrels earlier in the day. But like us, she was persistent. She positioned herself directly underneath each

drey, ready to make light work of any bold enough to try an escape via land.

Persistence is key, as drey poking is a pursuit with many peaks and troughs. Eventually, some luck came our way and we boosted our bag with a further five squirrels in the afternoon, bringing our day's total to a competitive 17. Was it enough to win? We nervously made our way back to the farmyard.

The nerves faded as, on our drive, the sound of frantic yelling wafted over from a nearby field. We stopped

call-of-duty efforts to leave no drey unturned. Then we scolded him for being a moron.

As it turned out, 17 squirrels weren't enough. It seemed the crack team of estate hands had stumbled upon the grey squirrel mothership and had brought back 21 casualties from their afternoon's hunting. But still, more than enough fun was had to heal the fresh wound of defeat.

Later, at the local pub, we shared stories of squirrels loved and lost. Plans were hatched around pints



"It seemed the crack team of estate hands had stumbled upon the squirrel mothership"

and, to our horror, saw a member of another team perched at the top of a tree. "There was a drey at the top," he explained, "empty of course. It was easy to get up here but I'm not sure how confident I feel about getting down."

What we'd heard was the uncontrollable laughter of his teammates, who had given up trying to rescue him and were now getting ample video and photographic evidence of the situation. Because We were better than Them, we got our poor colleague out of the tree and congratulated him on his beyond-the-

of ale: "Perhaps if we had some kind of thermal imaging, we would know where they were before we even poked them?" "A trained monkey with a flak jacket?"

We waved our arms in the air to describe our busy-tailed quarry flitting from tree to tree. In the middle of it all was the trophy, mounted on a pristine piece of chestnut. It's a cheap and tacky nutcracker, most likely to break if used. I'll be taking it home next year. 🐿

 Follow James on Twitter
@JFishywill



Lindsay Waddell is a former chairman of the NGO and a retired gamekeeper

Upland keeper



New rules governing heather – burning and cutting – have struck a major blow to those who manage the land for wildlife and grazing

No one was expecting the revised heather management news that came from Natural England (NE) a few weeks ago. Over the past decade or more, there have been countless meetings, scores of site visits, and enough hot air to launch any number of very large balloons. Then the owners, keepers and agents thought they had reached some sort of working arrangement that would allow them to manage the heather in a manner which, though not ideal, did at least take account of grazing, as well as summer fires and breeding birds.

It would now appear that NE has pulled out the rug from under everyone's feet with one swift tug. Had this been planned for some years, or is it an opportunistic move because of the position the whole carbon debate has reached? It is possible that the end of heather management by both burning and – it would appear from a conversation one keeper has had – cutting has been the target all along.

If so, it reflects very badly on those involved. If not, what is now proposed is a blow for a whole range of species that are struggling to keep viable numbers outside the heather moorland boundary. The real problem is, if they do fail in years to come, those who took these decisions will have gone from their posts. If this has simply been an attack on grouse shooting, it is a seriously short-term view to take and grouse shooting will carry on.

Either way, any trust that existed between the managers and NE must be very thin by now. I am but an observer these days but the muttering from keepers can be heard rumbling up and down the Dales. They have had a set of management criteria foisted upon them that are the equivalent of a very large wall which they will find hard to scale. They will still, in theory, be allowed to carry out some form of management but the bar has been set



Lapwing, as well as curlew and golden plover, do not like long vegetation for their breeding sites

so high, it will be difficult to jump it. There are few gamekeepers who are well enough qualified botanists to undertake what will be required, 20 quadrats per plot, before an application is submitted for work to be done. If the work is consented, the site has to be revisited five years later to see if the work has had the desired effect; an improvement of the habitat. If it has not, the consequences may be severe.

This will mean that professionals will have to be employed to undertake survey

“Natural England has pulled out the rug from under everyone's feet with one swift tug”

work on managers' behalf. Not all those who shoot grouse and manage moorland are millionaires, despite what many might think.

I have banged the drum long and hard on this one but this I fear may well be a step too far with regard to breeding waders which do not like long vegetation, curlew,

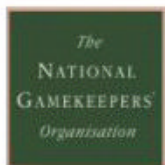
lapwing and golden plover. These birds have been shown to choose open nest sites where possible and that on moorland equates to newish fires. Sheep numbers have been reduced over large swathes of the uplands to allow vegetation to recover. On one site, NE had to ask for some to be reinstated to keep down invasive grasses that were smothering the more delicate plants.

I wonder what will happen on many more in a few years' time? All the science is there but NE has chosen to ignore it. It seems to take the view that it will plough its own furrow regardless, all on the back of carbon loss – something the managers had addressed quite some time ago.

Wader wonder

At least the waders that nest lower down the hill will not have to worry about too much cover. They are back already thanks to some unseasonal warm weather. Lapwings have been flying into the dale in numbers, along with good lots of curlew.

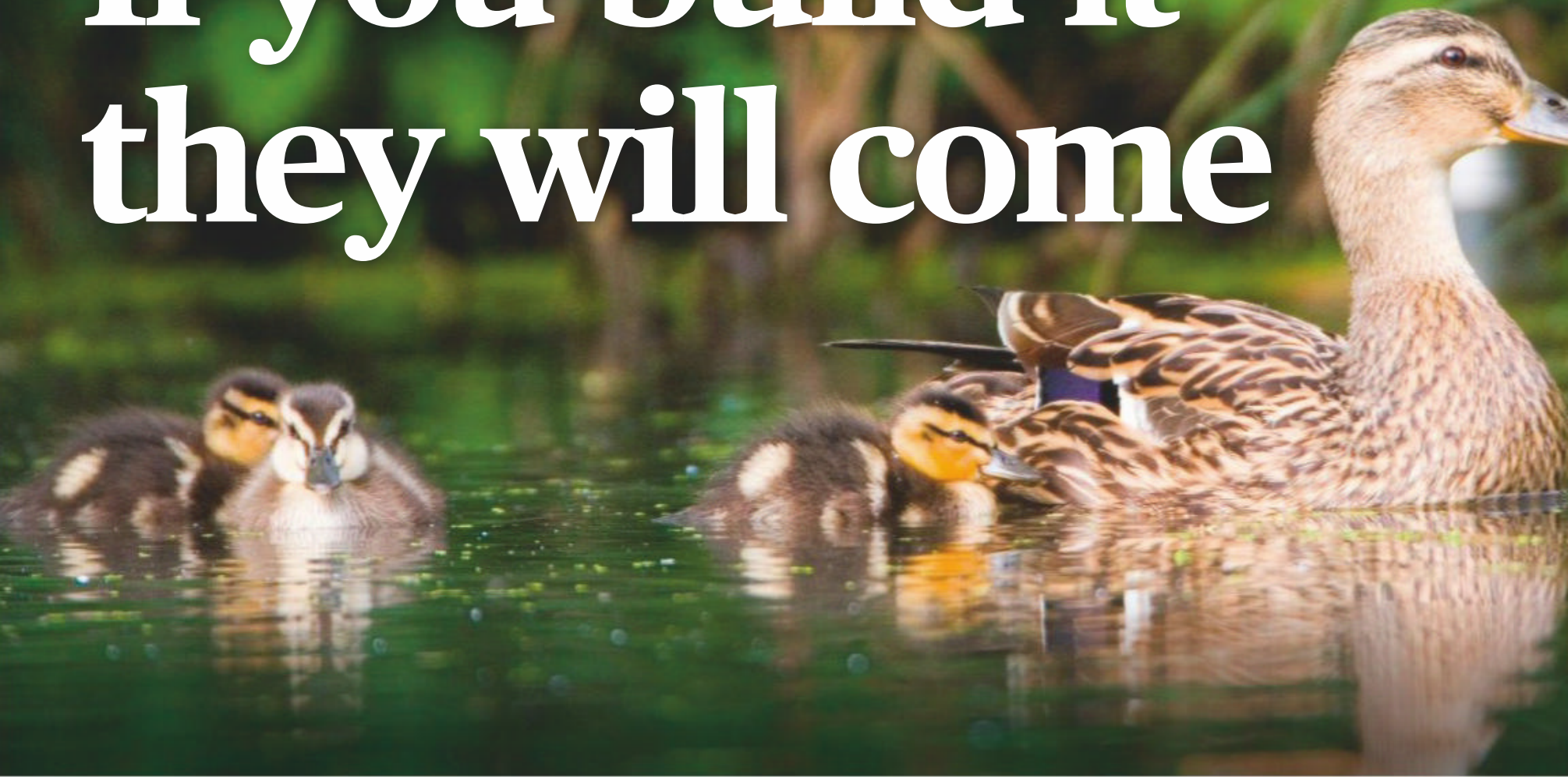
I heard a snipe displaying the other evening and the grey geese have been heading out on to the moor for a week or so now. They may well get a jolt back to reality, for the weather can turn in a week. I hope not, because once these birds come back they are reluctant to leave again and, if a very hard spell comes, many of them simply die. The flip side of the coin is that if they do not get a check, I will see some of the earliest nests I have ever witnessed.



This column is in association with the NGO

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If you build it they will come



An award-winning farming duo are regenerating a flightpond that will be valuable for all sorts of species; Richard Negus finds inspiration

Having a single pond on your farm shoot is a major boost for all wildlife; have more than one and flora and fauna thrive exponentially. Imagine therefore the impact of having numerous ponds running through your shoot, all linked by well-maintained hedges, cover crops and marginal strips.

The Barker family of Westhorpe in Suffolk have created such a habitat, with 30 ponds in 1,250 acres. The sheer number and variety of game and farmland birds, wildfowl, mammals, amphibian and invertebrate life that flourish due to this inspirational approach to farming and conservation is a national success story.

The network of ponds that cross the mixed arable farm form an integral part of the wild bird shoot that is the pride and joy of Brian Barker. His cousin Patrick is ambivalent about shooting, yet sees its value in conservation. A devoted bird ringer and naturalist, he views the wetland areas of the farm purely as wildlife habitats. This glorious symbiosis of these two farming

conservationists, with differing interests, has resulted in one perfect outcome. A successful farm shoot, a profitable farm and an admirable home for wildlife.

It is little wonder that they have won such accolades as the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group's Silver Lapwing Award for conservation and the *Farmers Weekly* Countryside Farmer of the Year award. I was extremely lucky to be invited by the cousins to follow the regeneration of one of the old ponds on the farm.

Ethical and sustainable

My aim is to show how such a pond could provide a boost for your shoot; the Barkers' aim is to encourage more people to take greater steps towards ethical and sustainable farming, shooting and conservation.

As with any conservation project, the first task is to consider which species we are targeting to attract or increase. Ducks on the whole are somewhat easy to please. They are happy with a relatively small expanse of water, some shelter from the elements and a safe location to feed in, nest

and rear young. The Barkers have looked at their ponds in a holistic way. Some of the water systems have been regenerated or created to be an integral part of the shoot, others are focused upon being vital havens for such rarities as the willow emerald damselfly or great crested newt.

Wigeon will come to this part of Suffolk in harsh weather, accompanied by a few shovelers and pintail. However, the main duck species we expect to see are mallard and teal. The extensive game records started by Brian and Patrick's grandfather in the 1950s show bags of up to 77 mallard shot in one day. Bear in mind that they have never released ducks nor game birds here; the significant number of grey partridges and wild pheasants that were and continue to be accounted for highlights the efficacy of this farm's ongoing conservation efforts. Mallard still figure greatly in the bag records today – Brian notes that nearly every drive will include ducks among the challenging birds put over the Guns.

The Barkers are old hands at pond regeneration, so much of the work

Ducks are somewhat easy to please, requiring a small expanse of water, shelter and a safe place to feed in, nest and rear young

from the elements for ducks but also vital habitat for all other birdlife, not to mention hunting territory for dragon and damselflies. If there is no such vegetation present, plant some.

The pond at Westhorpe is an old farm water system; once upon a time it was probably used to water the cattle when the farm, like most in Suffolk

spotted flycatchers have man-made hospitality available.

Once the vegetation is under control, the digger can get to work to dredge out the accumulated leaf matter and silt that has built up over the years. In the 1980s it was decided that this pond would be solely rain fed, so a bund was created to separate the standing water

“Nest boxes in the remaining trees mean species from treecreepers to tawny owls have man-made hospitality available”

pre-1950s, was a mixed enterprise. It takes the form of an upside down “T” and looks like a battlefield. Ash, willow and brash have been felled from the southern margins. The pond was almost choked with invasive Norfolk reeds, flag iris and reed mace, but these too have been cleared out.

To the north there is a mixed shelter belt of evergreen and deciduous trees and a wide margin of blackthorn, managed to attract nightingales. Nest boxes are provided in the remaining trees, meaning that everything from treecreepers and tawny owls to kestrels and

from the nearby running watercourse and field drains. This was a bold move, particularly in the light of the incredibly dry summer we endured last year. However, it does ensure that no potential agricultural run-off can get into the pond’s water system.

Vital element

Dredging is a vital element in pond regeneration. You are aiming to dig until you reach solid clay – if you are on a clay-based subsoil. If you are not so fortunate, a pond liner will be required, at some expense. While the digger’s bucket removes the silt, the vehicle’s tracks compact the clay, effectively sealing the pond. The silt that is removed needs to be piled ➡



Mallard still figure greatly in the bag records, with nearly every drive including ducks among the birds put over the Guns

on this particular pond was done by eye and intuition. If you are not blessed with their years of experience it may pay dividends to take a survey of your site.

If ponds are to flourish they require light. Many old, unmanaged ponds will be surrounded by trees, shrubs and bramble. It is best practice to clear much of this cover to the southern and western sides of the pond, allowing as much natural light in as possible. The northern and eastern edges can be left leafy.

An existing shelter belt of trees or hedging not only provides protection



The ditch and bank on the right of the pond stop run-off from the field, preventing harmful nitrates from contaminating the water



Three months on, the banks are starting to regenerate and the water is beginning to clear

“Nothing ruins a delicate ecosystem quicker than a dog walker swimming their mutt through your flightpond”

up away from the pond edge. This will take some time to dry out but enables any evicted specimen to make a short trip back to the pond.

Patrick has decided to use the spoil to make a bank that will shelter the pond from the public footpath that runs nearby, so it receives less disturbance from ramblers. As most gamekeepers and conservationists will testify, nothing ruins a delicate ecosystem quicker than a dog walker swimming their unruly mutt through your flightpond.

When digging out a pond, ensure that there is a variety of depths provided. Mallard and teal are dabblers; mallard prefer water of approximately 40cm depth to feed in, the diminutive teal a mere 15cm. The pond at Westhorpe has extensive shallows, as well as depths of up to 2m at the long end of the inverted “T” shape. These deep areas will help to slow the ingress of choking reed and ensure that a rain-fed pond remains wet for 12 months of the year. Deeper water is also valuable for many amphibians, invertebrates and reptiles.

The excavations of the Westhorpe pond were completed in late November. When I visited three and a half months later, wildlife was already relishing the new light

and space. As I arrived two pairs of mallard took to the wing. Watermint is starting to sprout its verdant new growth, highlighting the purity of the water. I could spot the splayed foot marks of moorhen in the mud of the shallows and the telltale delving burrows of a snipe’s beak. The banks, now bathed in early spring sunlight, were starting to regenerate.

The Barkers will leave the flora to regenerate naturally, only cutting plantlife back should invasive plants appear. The water is starting to clear.

Return of nature

It is estimated that the cost of regenerating this pond topped £2,800, with £2,100 reclaimed through a higher-tier capital grant and all the work carried out by one member of the farm staff over seven days. The work done should be good for at least 10 years before a digger is required again. It will be fascinating to observe the return of nature to this pond during the summer and how it contributes to the overall conservation efforts across this exemplary farm.

The ethos behind this capital investment reflects that of the Barker family. They, like many other farmers, understand that while their business needs to be profitable, they are also custodians of the land. This is a message all of us involved with managing shoots, big or small, must remember. The ponds we create are not merely for the ducks we like to shoot, they are vital ecosystems that host myriad life. 🦆

 Follow Richard on Twitter
@TrooperSnooks

➔ In the next instalment of this three-part series, Richard will go back to assess progress and in the season he will return to see what sport the pond can provide.



The regeneration work, which took place in November last year, spanned seven days and cost £2,800

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All Fosse and feathers

Field-to-fork is all the rage so Richard Hardy takes a chef out pigeon shooting for the first time to produce a sumptuous meal at the end



Mick Stead and Richard MacNair were deployed some distance away while Richard Hardy looked after guest Mark Hartstone



When the *Shooting Times* Editor has a brainwave, I often end up in a sticky situation. This time, I found myself on a surprisingly warm day, without a cloud in the sky and not a breath of wind, on a mission to take a talented chef out for his first experience of roost shooting. The plan was to have him produce a sumptuous meal, at the end of the day, if the pigeons obliged.

The countdown to dusk was ticking but I had wisely assembled a crack team of long-suffering friends to stack the odds slightly in my favour: Mick Stead is a stalwart of my ever-evolving wild bird shoot and Richard MacNair is another sporting friend. Both are handy Shots and, most importantly they are unerringly positive.

Added to this team was our special guest Mark Hartstone, proprietor of La Fosse, a restaurant with rooms in Cranborne, Dorset. Geologist turned award-winning chef Mark is an avid supporter of game and locally sourced foods in general. His menus often feature Hebridean hogget from my own small flock. He'd accepted my invitation with typical enthusiasm. All we needed now were the damned things to stop feeding and return to their chosen roost, or what I was hoping was going to be their chosen

C. WARREN



Richard Hardy and Mark walked down the hill into a prime position, orbited by a knot of eager terriers

roost. Though, admittedly, I'm by no means an expert in the weird and wonderful ways of the Wessex "hedge grouse".

At the end of every game season I solemnly resolve to "shoot more pigeons" but every year I'm waylaid from such good intentions by hounds, then trout and then there's lambing. Then the roe rut. Thereafter come grouse and salmon, then suddenly the stubbles are bare and we are back into the pursuit of noble wild pheasants.

However, this year I had taken far more notice of flightlines and habits

to the rich pickings of the young crop – our target had been established.

Guns and guest met at the appointed hour, and the safety briefing was deliberate and detailed as was sensible with a keen novice in the ranks. Mick and Richard were deployed away at some distance while I looked after Mark. The need to shoot into blue sky rather than the steeply rising hill was reinforced. We'd start off sharing my Beretta over-and-under but the trusty Benelli was to hand if conditions and aptitude allowed.

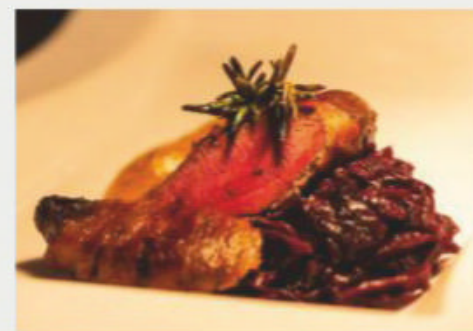
"Fields of rape were scanned and evenings watching teal on to woodland splashes provided clues to the pigeonly habits"

than usual; the knowledge of this date on the calendar had necessitated a little more attention. Fields of emerging rape were scanned for more than just browsing muntjac, evenings watching teal on to woodland splashes provided a few clues to the pigeonly habits and a fruitless foxing expedition had revealed a good-sized and regular roost.

It was in a block of tall softwoods surrounded by older oaks, handily sloping down a hill and close enough

We walked down the hill into a prime position, orbited by a knot of eager terriers. Our backs were against a thick hedge, outlines masked by the jagged form of dormant winter hawthorn, but a hunt jump to our right gave good visibility of our incoming quarry.

It was early still but, with the sun and temperature sinking rapidly, the odd pigeon was starting to seek the warmth of this chosen roost. The first one thrust over the hedge and into ➔



HOT SMOKED PIGEON RECIPE BY MARK HARTSTONE

Pigeons are versatile and are best butchered into breast, fillets and wings. If you have a big bag, use all the fillets in a stir fry, quickly cooked and marinated in an Asian sauce. Or you can pan fry breasts quickly, wrap them in cured ham to keep them moist and serve pink, as part of a salad or hearty main course.

When I worked in a Michelin-starred restaurant in France, we'd save the legs to put in a fricassé for a staff dinner at the end of the week.

THE METHOD

My favourite way to cook pigeons at La Fosse is to hot smoke them.



- ☞ Salt the pigeon, ideally a day prior to smoking (12g salt per kilogram of meat).
- ☞ Place the pigeon breasts on a cooling rack in an aluminium foil bag with a handful of apple wood shavings, seal the bag, then place it in a large old frying pan on the heat.
- ☞ The pigeon breasts cook and smoke simultaneously in about eight to 10 minutes. They are best served pink. The flavour does develop over a couple of days, so it pays to be organised.
- ☞ To serve, thinly slice the pigeon breast and serve with salad.

You can buy stove-top smokers to be used in the kitchen or out in the field on a gas stove.



Richard offers advice to his novice guest on how best to approach the Wessex “hedge grouse”

our sights, jinking at the last minute and curling back between the leafless oaks before the novice had a chance even to lift the gun to his eye. “Hell, they’re fast,” said Mark as we scanned the horizon with fresh enthusiasm.

The next pigeons came as a matched pair, straight and true and Mark was ready. His shot was miles behind at a range of probably 60m and he completely forget the second barrel. But he was grinning from ear to ear. “Leave them until you can see the bars on the wings,” I advised, more in hope than anticipation while picking up my spare gun.

The frequency of incomers started to increase and I could hear Richard

getting a few shots away on the far side of the wood. Mick was also enjoying some sport and a couple of his single shots had a deadly deliberateness about them. We were having fun at our corner of the wood but I was becoming hopeful that we may have enough in the bag for an evening snack, or possibly even a culinary extravaganza.

Mark was getting closer to contacting with a bird. News passed by shouts through the trees confirmed my hunch that game bags were not empty, so I was letting him enjoy the passing and somewhat lofty opportunities rather than concentrating on my own sport.

The jungle telegraph revealed that we now had six in the bag so the snack was transformed to feast and victory was in sight. We only needed Mark to connect with some luck and I could consider my part of the deal complete.

Shower of feathers

As the light slipped away and the blue sky turned orange, the trickle of pigeons crossing our ambush slowed and minutes passed between fleeting opportunities. Then a lone pigeon swung up and over the oak to our far right. It lazily swooped down before catching sight of our crouching party and powered up towards the safety of the softwood fronds. Mark stepped out of the shadows and pushed the safety forwards, and his single shot resulted in a shower of grey and blue feathers.

Our hearts stopped in the moment of silence then the bird continued onwards without a care in the world. The perfect ending was not to be.

As we trudged back up the hill the leg-pulling started in earnest. Three friends and a guest had walked out on a warm Sunday afternoon, but now four friends were sharing the stories in the light of a head torch. Mark was revelling in the new experiences and retelling tales of missed opportunities.

With gates locked, dogs fed and guns safely stowed, we reconvened around the roaring log fire at La Fosse, where we were served a magnificent meal entirely based around the humble pigeon. 🐦



Mark Hartstone, chef proprietor at La Fosse in Cranborne, with a couple of pigeons destined for the table



Jamie Blackett

Country Diary

The sight of “mad” hares is one of the joys of spring but, with hunting and coursing now illegal, our relationship with them has been severed

The fields that, God willing, will be hidden by dense crops in a matter of weeks are bare. They are not even striped by the roller yet, especially where the geese are taunting me by grazing through the day. Driving around, seeing the first sprays of blackthorn in the hedges and a reassuring crop of catkins for the birds, I stop and search some of our bigger fields for hares.

There used to be at least half-a-dozen in each field when I was a child. But that was when the whole place was intensively kept and we still had a few coveys of grey partridges knocking about in the early 1970s. We still see hares most days but they are much rarer now. If you drew two graphs and had one showing the decline in the number of hares and the other showing the increase in the number of badgers and other predators over the same period, I would bet that, seen side by side, they would form a symmetrical V.

“Modern farming practices”, the usual scapegoat, have if anything become more wildlife friendly here since the 1970s. Though there are some who take three cuts of silage, we don’t. We believe there is time for leverets to get up and off before our first cut in mid-June, then again before the second in August.

No ground game

The hares no longer gather so conspicuously. Perhaps they have adapted their behaviour to become more covert as the skies have filled with raptors. We no longer shoot hares here and the “no ground game” edict seems fairly universal where I shoot. When my brother and I were learning to shoot, my father could always guarantee that if we went out with the old .22 rifle we would get a stalk and then a shot.

Sure enough, during the Easter holidays when I was 10, the first thing I ever shot was a hare. I can still remember the thudding of my heart as I stalked it and the intense concentration as I pulled the trigger, then the pride with which I carried it back and the taste of it jugged a few days later.

We think of the hare as a gentle, passive creature but they can be fierce in defence of their young. I once saw an adult hare



Brown hares have declined as numbers of badgers and other predators have grown exponentially

knocking seven bells out of a rook. There must have been leverets and the rook had gone too close; the two tussled for several minutes with the hare kicking it hard.

Eventually the rook threw in the towel and flew away unsteadily before landing in the next field. The hare seemed none the worse for her scuffle. Sadly, it was before the days of phone cameras or it would surely have gone viral.

Speaking of viral, it was deeply depressing to read (*Can we save the*

“Modern farming practices have, if anything, become more wildlife friendly here since the 1970s”

hare?, 27 February) about the leap of rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD2) from rabbits to hares. In happier, saner times the countryside might have been able to do something about it. The traditional methods of hare management, beagling and coursing, had the crucial distinction

from shooting that they encouraged natural selection. Sick, lame and old hares were killed, fit hares escaped.

Then, the beagling and coursing fraternities might have carried out a methodical cull of diseased hares in the big fields of East Anglia before RHD2 spread. Not least, it would have provided an immediate supply of infected hares for the laboratories and vital intelligence. And elsewhere across the country, continued beagling and coursing would have allowed us to map the spread of the disease.

But one of the many malign effects of the Hunting Act is that we have severed our relationship with the hare. Now that we no longer hunt it, we can only watch helplessly as the brown hare follows the red squirrel and the hedgehog to near extinction. No doubt certain BBC presenters will say that farming and hunting have been responsible. It’s enough to make you weep.

➔ Red Rag to a Bull, Rural Life in an Urban Age by Jamie Blackett (Quiller) is out now.

∞ Jamie Blackett farms in Galloway. He runs a small family shoot and was one of the founders of the Dumfriesshire & Stewartry Foxhounds.



Crispy on the outside and tender on the inside, these pheasant fingers are sure to become a firm family favourite



Game Cookery

Upgrade your regular fish fingers to these delicious morsels of pheasant breast coated in crispy breadcrumbs for a perfect Friday night snack

☛ Recipe kindly donated by Gill Meller
A chef, food writer, author, food stylist and cookery teacher living near the small fishing town of Lyme Regis, in Dorset, Gill Meller has been part of the River Cottage team for 11 years, working closely with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall across the whole business.

Ingredients

FOR THE PHEASANT

- ☛ 4 PHEASANT BREASTS
- ☛ SALT AND FRESHLY GROUND BLACK PEPPER
- ☛ 50G PLAIN FLOUR
- ☛ 2 EGGS, BEATEN
- ☛ 100G FRESH WHITE BREADCRUMBS
- ☛ OIL FOR FRYING

FOR THE TARTAR SAUCE

- ☛ 4 TBSP GOOD-QUALITY MAYONNAISE
- ☛ 3 TBSP CAPERS, DRAINED AND CHOPPED
- ☛ 3 TBSP GHERKINS, DRAINED AND CHOPPED
- ☛ 1 SHALLOT OR HALF AN ONION, FINELY CHOPPED
- ☛ A SQUEEZE OF LEMON JUICE
- ☛ 3 TBSP FRESH PARSLEY, CHOPPED
- ☛ 1 TBSP DILL, CHOPPED
- ☛ SEA SALT AND FRESHLY GROUND BLACK PEPPER

This month's game cookery recipe has been kindly provided by Gill Meller, a multi-award-winning food writer and chef who is best known for his role running the kitchen at the renowned River Cottage HQ. Gill has starred alongside Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall in the hit television series *River Cottage* and is well known for his use of locally sourced, seasonal ingredients.

Gill's recipe is simple and shows just how versatile pheasant meat is. He has created "pheasant fingers" — well, if you can have fish fingers then why not? — with a tangy tartar sauce. Give it a go — it may well become a household favourite.

"Gill's recipe is simple and shows just how versatile pheasant meat is"

The simplicity of this recipe belies the craft. Cooking the pheasant inside the crispy breadcrumbs steams the meat, so take care not to overcook your "fingers", particularly as some moisture will have been lost in the defrosting process. **Tim Maddams**

➔ To find out more about Gill and his work visit www.gillmeller.com/about-me.

PHEASANT FINGERS WITH TANGY TARTAR SAUCE

THE METHOD *Serves 2 to 4*

Pheasant is a well-flavoured meat and fantastically versatile. With the right approach and a sure hand, it rivals chicken any day of the week. If you are a fan of classic chicken or fish goujons then you

have to try these "pheasant fingers". They are one of my favourite things to prepare if I have some lovely fresh pheasant breasts to hand. They are perfect on a Friday night with a few beers and a film.

1 For the tartar sauce, mix together all the ingredients in a small bowl and place in the fridge until needed.

2 Set the pheasant breasts down on a board and cut them into long finger-sized pieces. Season them all over with salt and pepper.

3 Place the flour, beaten eggs and breadcrumbs into separate shallow bowls. Toss the pheasant in the flour to lightly coat, and shake off any excess. Dip the floured pheasant into the egg, then into the crumbs to coat and transfer to a plate.

4 Place a large pan on the heat and add about 1cm of oil. When the oil is hot enough, a cube of bread will turn golden in 60 seconds. Fry the pheasant fingers in batches for 2 to 3 minutes on each side, depending on the size of the pieces, until cooked through and golden.

5 Remove using a slotted spoon and transfer to a large plate lined with some kitchen paper.

6 Sprinkle the pheasant fingers with a little flaky salt and serve with the tartar sauce for dipping.

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“Support from shooters is vital”

RPPDG chairman Nick Lyall talks to Matt Cross about how he plans to tackle the increasingly knotty problem of illegal raptor persecution

Nick Lyall's day job is demanding enough for most people. As well as the regular duties of a police superintendent, he is responsible for policing football matches and demonstrations, overseeing his force's armed officers and taking charge in the event of a chemical attack. However, Nick has chosen to take on an additional challenge: as chairman of the Raptor Persecution Priority Delivery Group (RPPDG) he has the job of sorting out the knotty problem of illegal raptor persecution.

I met Nick at Bedfordshire Police HQ shortly after the announcement that several pro-shooting groups had not attended the RPPDG's last meeting (*News*, 20 February). His message to those groups was clear: “I want them back at the table.”

Nick's interest in raptors and their persecution began during a spell as an inspector in rural Northamptonshire when red kites were being reintroduced. “Being aware of some of the sensitive release sites, I felt like I had a bit of ownership and responsibility for making sure that reintroduction was a success,” he explained. His daughter's curiosity about the kites, which visited their garden, cemented his interest. “If you have children, it sparks your interest as a parent.” When the opportunity to chair the RPPDG came up, it seemed like a good way to give others the chance to see and enjoy these magnificent birds.

Understanding the role of shooting in raptor persecution has been an important area for Nick and he has

arrived at his own view. “I have been reported in other forums pointing the finger specifically at gamekeepers and saying it's just them shooting [the raptors], but that absolutely isn't the case. There is a whole variety of people committing persecution offences for a whole variety of reasons. For me, it's about understanding the reasons why they might do that.

“There are genuine people, whose livelihoods are at stake, who are committing persecution offences; there is clearly organised criminality in terms of multi-million-pound industries that are committing persecution offences; and there's a whole raft of things in between – people whose hobbies are impacted by birds of prey and even people who have access to a firearm and are just out for a bit of a laugh.”

While Nick is unambiguous that “there is a clear link” between



Nick Lyall is trying to raise awareness about raptors

shooting and raptor persecution, he is not convinced by claims that the entire industry tacitly supports it: “Those who I've spoken to in the shooting industry are very much against persecution taking place.”

Later in the interview, he compared shooters involved with raptor offences to the small number of corrupt police officers.

Operation Owl

Nick explained that his aim for the RPPDG is to change its focus from



Nick Lyall says those he has spoken to in the shooting industry are very much against persecution



The reintroduction of red kites sparked Nick's interest in raptors

out on your land under cover of darkness with night vision, as an offender or a potential offender, you're going to know the Old Bill are there.

So, for me, it's about moving away from a group that was solely focused on trying to catch people to one that's focused on prevention and raising awareness."

enforcement to raising awareness. Part of his current plan is to take Operation Owl, North Yorkshire Police's anti-persecution initiative, and to develop it into a nationwide, awareness-raising drive.

Explaining his focus on raising awareness rather than enforcement, he said: "Enforcement opportunities in persecution cases are very few

Intelligence

Nick was confident that increased awareness will lead to increased intelligence, "so enforcement cases will be intelligence led. That intelligence will come if we raise awareness of the issue."

He went on to make it clear that he believes support from shooting is vital and appealed directly to

"People are committing persecution offences. For me, it's about understanding the reasons why they might do that"

and far between. Why put all of our effort into enforcing something that's really difficult at a time when policing is under the cosh in terms of all the other stuff that we've got to do?"

He explained the difficulty from a police perspective: "We don't have the resources to patrol persecution hotspot areas 24/7 to prevent it taking place or to catch people. If you are

shooters for their help. "If you know who these individuals are who are committing offences, then either contact me directly, contact your local police, or use the confidential reporting methods that are out there, Crimestoppers or the RSPB's hotline."

Nick assured anyone reporting crimes via Crimestoppers that they would be protected. "It is completely



Golden eagles are among the birds of prey that have been the subject of rural crime

anonymous. I've been involved in a number of cases where knowing who the individual was that reported it confidentially would have really helped the investigation. But there is genuinely no way of us discovering who those individuals are."

Candid

Concerns over how enforcement has been done in the past are frequently raised by those involved with shooting. RSPB HQ is just a few miles from Nick's office and a few hours after I met him, Nick was due to meet Mark Thomas, the RSPB's head of investigations. Nick was candid about how he sees the role of the RSPB in investigating. "The honest answer is, I'm not entirely sure yet."

Nick is an authorising officer under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act and can sign off police requests to carry out surveillance, so he is well versed in the legalities and civil liberties issues around it. When I pressed him on the RSPB's unregulated surveillance activities, Nick clearly understood the concern: "I wouldn't want to think that I'm sitting in my backyard and somebody is watching me without the authority to do so. So yes, I completely understand where people's concerns would come from in that respect."

I was left with the impression that Nick is determined to understand and tackle the raptor persecution problem but is equally determined not to take any side. Only time will tell if he will be successful. 🦅



Merkel K3 Extreme .308

Elegant and superb to handle, this single-shot rifle is lightweight, dependable and in the field it shoots as good as it looks, says Bruce Potts

Merkel, one of the oldest gunmakers in the Suhl district of Germany, is renowned for its fine shotguns, rifles and double- or triple-barrelled guns. The Merkel K3 harks back to the tradition of quality single-shot rifles that are popular for Alpine regions, travelling hunters and those who like and only need one shot. But beneath its deceptively simplistic exterior lies a meticulously built rifle.

The K3 is available in a range of stock options from classic “hog’s back” to full-length Stutzen, with others on request. The grade-2 wood is basic but nicely figured. Calibre choice ranges from the rimmed

variety of 6.5mm and 7mm x 57R to 6.5mm and 7mm x 65R versions to the newer 30R and powerful 9.3x74R.

I had the .308 Win version, of which the other rimless calibres available are .270 Win, .30-06, 8x57, 7mm Rem Mag or .30 Win Mag, with others in the pipeline. This makes the K3 suitable for deer, boar or African plains game, cementing the rifle’s credentials as a great travelling gun.

I’m a fan of single-shot rifles. They are elegant and tactile guns to use – they are often shorter than standard rifles due to having no conventional action, and handle superbly as a result. They are also often lightweight so you can carry them all day without fatigue. Best of all, the single-shot break action has been perfected over the centuries so is utterly reliable.

Stock

The K3 has a traditional German-styled stock with hog’s-back/Bavarian-type cheekpiece. Even with a scope fitted the comb is not too low for correct scope alignment. This black-action Sporter model has grade-2 walnut – the Stutzen model has grade 4 – but there is still a good

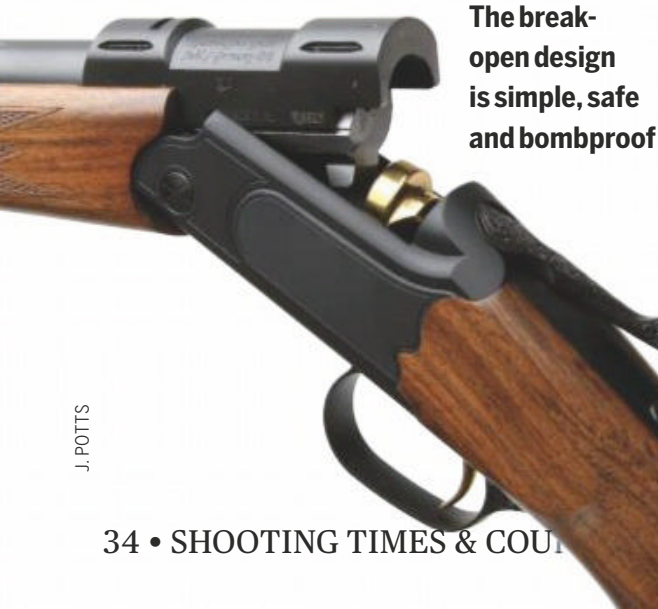
NEED TO KNOW	
Name	K3 Extreme
Manufacturer	Merkel
Type	Single shot, break open
Barrel length	21.5in, fluted
Calibre	.308 Win
Overall length	36.25in
Weight	2.5kg
Stock	High-grade walnut
Length of pull	14.25in
Trigger	Single-stage trigger
Safety	Auto, cock/de-cock system
Price	£3,825
Contact	Viking Arms, tel 01423 780810

overall colour with strong, straight-grained figuring throughout, with a practical and good-looking rubbed oil finish. There is a quite upright pistol-grip stance and the right-handed palm swell provides a firm and assured natural grip. There is a solid black rubber recoil pad, as well as a fixed sling swivel attachment.

The fore-end is well appointed with finely cut chequering and the slimline profile suits the svelte K3 design. The Schnabel fore-end tip finishes off a classical and practical stock.

The K3 is a break-open single-shot rifle. To disassemble you simply pull back on the inset lever in the fore-end’s underside, which removes the fore-end from the barrel hanger. Next, open the top lever to the action and the barrel will tilt forward. It can be removed from the large barrel hinge pin that traverses the action front.

Behind the hinge-pin lug is a second lug that drops down from the action and locks into the tilting Jaeger bolt recess which, when the



The break-open design is simple, safe and bombproof



This lovely muntjac buck fell to the Merkel K3 and Browning BXR ammunition in .308 Win

action is closed, tightly grips this lug. It is a clever design that works faultlessly. The bolt is nitrided for strength and smoothness and houses the firing pin, which floats in the assembly and only emerges when the action is closed.

When the action closes, the top of the bolt fits into the barrel overhang, creating a strong union between barrel and action. The top lever, like that of a shotgun, is actually cast and has moulded-in engraving – an interesting choice – but the rest of the alloy action is superbly machined and finished in black with only the anodised gold trigger-blade accenting the design.

Trigger and safety

The safety is a large lever fitted to the action tang with a high raised profile. As the action is opened, the safety moves rearward to the “off” position and has to be reset to “fire” before taking the shot. Very safe but noisy.

The trigger has a smooth, slender profile and a crisp, zero-creep weight of pull of 2.85lb. There is a small rotating lever behind the trigger set into the trigger-guard that, when rotated, has three positions for differing weights from 1.5lb to 3.5lb.

No sights are fitted but the K3 has a saddle-type mounting system that the Europeans like and which suits their type of rifles. There are twin attachment grooves, cut into the top of the receiver front and rear,

with a horizontal recoil slot that all correspond to lugs in the one-piece scope mount.

Attachment is superb, with two quick-detachable levers that are adjustable for differing grip. When the inset plunger is pushed then rotated 120°, the mount is removed.

Precision made

The barrel is precision-made of high-strength chromoly and has a tough blued exterior finish. The K3 on test has a 21.5in barrel and, due to the break-action design, the overall length of the rifle is only 36.25in. It weighs in at a trim 2.5kg. The barrel has a semi-medium-weight hunter profile with eight identical flutes covering nearly

“The single-shot break action has been perfected over time so is utterly reliable”

the entire length of the barrels. These reduce weight further, look good and aid cooling to a small degree.

The muzzle is threaded with a 15mm/1 metric pitch for sound moderator fitment. Internally, the bore’s finish is clean and the barrel has four rifling lands. Non-ejector, it presents the spent case for easy removal when the action is open. The break-barrel design allows a calibre change for even more versatility.

Range test

The K3 came threaded, so I fitted an older MAE Scout moderator and used a Meostar R21.7-10x42 RD scope. I removed the scope and reattached to check return to zero and it was spot on, less than 0.5in difference.

The factory loads tested, and the results achieved from that 21.5in barrel, are as follows:

- **Hornady 150-gr SST** – always fast at 2,870fps and 2,744ft/lb, with 1in groups at 100 yards
- **Browning BXR 150-gr** – shot at 2,648fps/2,336ft/lb, again with consistent 1in groups
- **Remington AccuTip 165-gr** – shot 2,587fps
- **Geco 165-gr** – shot a little slower at 2,548fps but still produced 1in to 1.25in groups

Despite the slightly lower velocities from the K3 barrel, the first thing that struck me was that from a cold barrel – as you would have at the beginning of a stalking expedition – the first round and the subsequent bullets hit exactly where the

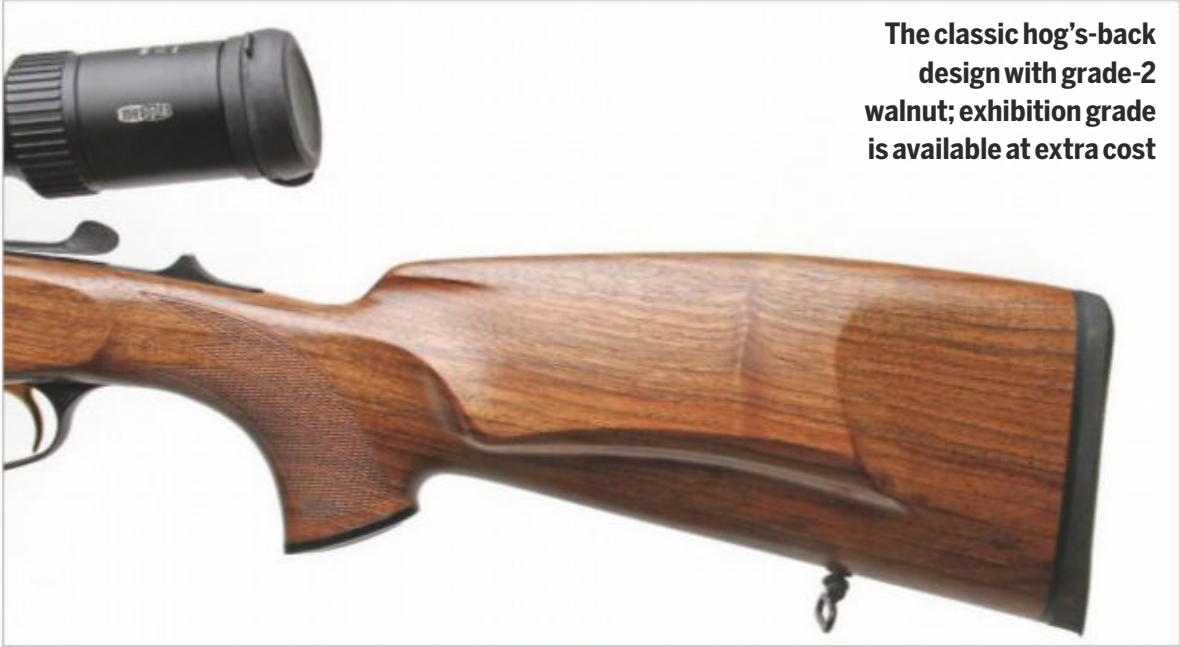
cross-hairs pointed. It is a small point but crucial for accuracy in a hunting situation; not all rifles do this.

Reloads

Reloads were chosen to shoot best in the Merkel K3’s shorter barrel, which meant slightly faster powder.

The 125-gr and 130-gr bullets of Nosler Ballistic and Hornady SP respectively, with a load of 44.25 grains of Alliant RL10X powder, shot 2,953fps and 2,879fps and put three shots sub-inch at 100 yards.

The traditional 150-gr bullets, such as the Hornady SST with 48.5 grains of Swiss RS50 powder, shot ¾in groups at 2,745fps/2,509 ft/lb. The heavier 180-gr bullets, such as the Nosler Partition and 47.0 grains of RL 17, shot 2,557fps and 2,613ft/lb energy. ➡



The classic hog’s-back design with grade-2 walnut; exhibition grade is available at extra cost

IN THE FIELD



Stalking unseen on the blind side of the ridge, Bruce prepares to take the shot

I forgot to fit a sling to the K3 but it was so light and nimble that it was no effort to carry, then cradle in my arms as I glassed the distant hedgelines for muntjac.

Though an Alpine-type rifle, the K3 is perfectly suitable for British woodland stalking and long stalks on the hill. It is a breeze to carry, handles beautifully and, as the range tests showed, is highly accurate.

The farm sits on the edge of some high ground that is bisected by hedgerows and blocks of woodland. The muntjac, ever on the move, use the hedges to pass from wood to wood, then pop out to nibble any new growth. At the edge of

“After a short whistle stopped the muntjac in his tracks, the Browning bullet found its mark”

the farm there is a dung heap where old tractor parts are left. It is a bit of no man’s land where no one goes and a nice muntjac buck knew it. He decided to use it as a short cut. The trouble was, I had spotted him.

I used the blind side of the ridge downwind to weave through the hawthorn and arrive on top of the

surrounding bank, where I perched. At first light the Meostar optics revealed the trotting outline of a muntjac. The instinctive nature of the K3 allowed a perfect hold and, after a short whistle stopped the buck in his tracks, the Browning BXR bullet found its mark and put an end to that little trick.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes less is more. The K3 wants for nothing and is the epitome of a fine-crafted single-shot rifle that exudes quality and shoots as good as it looks. Yes, an ejector would be nice, but the rifle is a delight to handle and shoot. It also breaks down easily to carry or for storage.

Accuracy	Consistent and first shot always to the point of aim.	18 / 20
Handling	Light and natural pointability.	19 / 20
Trigger	Incredibly defined and precise.	18 / 20
Stock	Classic design on this model and well appointed.	17 / 20
Value	Some may say it’s pricey for a single shot but it is all you need.	17 / 20
SCORE		89 / 100

Does choke matter?



While the right shotgun choke can benefit your shooting, tinkering endlessly can cause more harm than good, says Simon Reinhold

“Pattern plates are the one thing that drives me crazy. You see people walking up there with boards and paper... When I go to a competition, call “pull” and a pattern plate comes out, I’ll start to shoot them. Until then I’ll stay away from them.” So says Ben Husthwaite, one of the most successful clay shooting coaches in the country.

His recipe for success has been tested in top-level competition using the same cartridge and gun combination for many years. But is he right to ignore the pattern plate?

Choke is one of the ingredients we test on a pattern plate. Simply put, it is the narrowing of the barrel at the muzzle end that constricts the shot cloud as it passes through. It was developed as a concept in the latter half of the 19th century during the maelstrom of gunsmithing invention, both here in the UK and in the US.

Patents for choke boring were applied for in 1866 within six weeks of each other by the American Sylvester Roper and by William Rochester Pape of Newcastle. The great self-publicising gunmaker W. W. Greener, however, did the serious marketing of choke and brought it to wider attention during the London Gun Trials, many of which he won.

The degree of choke in your gun barrel is the difference between the size of the bore – the barrel diameter – relative to the constriction at the muzzle. For this reason, plug-in choke “gauges” will only ever give you a very rough guide. The only way to measure choke accurately is with a bore gauge of the type gunsmiths use to measure bore diameter when checking if a gun is in proof.

Barrel and muzzle

When buying secondhand guns, if a barrel has had any pits bored out of it and been reproofed as a result, this will alter the choke measurement without the choke itself being changed. The relationship between barrel and muzzle is one that matters.

Choke itself is measured in thousandths of an inch usually up to 40 thousandths. Every five thousandths of an inch is one point of choke. Normal chokes are given in eighths. Twenty thousandths of an inch between muzzle diameter and barrel diameter would therefore be 20/40, four-eighths or half choke. I prefer to measure in eighths.

The technical aspects aside, the question before us is, does it matter? The answer is, up to a point, yes. It is down to you to find out what ➔

Simon fitting a choke; simply put, the narrowing of the barrel at the muzzle end





It is vital to use a pattern plate to determine what combination of choke works for you

particular combination works for you but you must use a pattern plate. BASC has an excellent information sheet on how to pattern-test properly – visit po.st/cartridgepatterning – but it is vital to use at least 10 cartridges through the same gun and choke to gather a big enough sample. It might surprise you what more open chokes are capable of. You may be shocked at how large gaps can appear in some extremely tight chokes too.

Multichokes for double-barrelled shotguns are relatively new. The first was the Winchoke, which was introduced by Winchester in 1969. Multichokes have now become commonplace and companies such as Teague Chokes will retrofit multichokes to any gun. The benefit of Teague’s thin-walled chokes is they do not alter the balance of the gun.

Muzzle-heavy

Some guns have the option of a multichoke or a fixed-choke version. Factory multichokes can feel muzzle-heavy compared with the fixed-choke versions, as factory screw-in chokes tend to be much thicker steel lying at one end of a fulcrum, like a heavy weight on a seesaw. The great benefit of the development of the multichoke is that it became much more adaptable and Sporting clay shooters could change it according to the targets they were facing.

But agonising over the best choke for a particular target can lead to indecision and distraction when you should just get on and shoot the bird. The best performers, both clay and

game, understand that reducing the variables in the recipe can help with the all-important ingredient for good shooting – confidence.

One of the very best, Olympic gold medallist Richard Faulds, said: “Personally, I’ve used Express cartridges and full- and full-choke for over 20 years now, but to be honest, when you compare the breaks that Tanya [Faulds] gets with improved cylinder [one-eighth] that she uses all the time, you can hardly tell the difference. It’s all down to confidence and what works for you.”

Choke certainly does matter when using steel shot for shooting wildfowl. Again, BASC’s guidance sheets are invaluable. You should not use

“Simplify it as much as possible then allow nature’s most astonishing computer – your brain – to do the maths for you”

high-performance steel wildfowling loads in tighter than half-choke. Steel pellets are harder than lead and they do not deform when passing through a constriction. Because of this, ring bulges can occur if too tight a choke is used with large steel pellets. Shotguns rarely blow up but bulges can ruin the performance and value of a gun.

Steel patterning

You can use smaller steel (7½) shot but steel patterns more tightly than lead – partly because it does not deform as it passes through a choke and partly because it has to be used with a plastic wad. So tighter chokes may not be worth it and again it is up to you to find out on a pattern plate. If you have any safety concerns, talk to the manufacturer or to BASC.

The cartridge you choose to use through the choke you select can have an effect too. Some of the top-end clay cartridges on offer can have a higher antimony content in the lead to make them harder and therefore pattern better. Some of them are even plated shot, which is designed to act as a lubricant between the pellets as the shot cloud moves down the barrel. Though it is commonly supposed that it makes the shot harder, plating alone does not. These top-level competition cartridges, designed to break that extra clay that separates the top of the leader board, also tend to be loaded with plastic wads.

All of these factors can combine to throw tighter patterns through the same choke when compared with game loads with fibre wads and standard lead pellets. We now see copper plating being applied to top-of-the-range game cartridges too.

Fibre vs plastic wads

There have always been arguments as to whether fibre wads throw more open patterns than plastic wads, but there are simply too many variables in the equation: barrel maker, length of forcing cone, bore diameter, choke profile and degree of choke. Then you have to add the range of component parts that cartridge manufacturers use in their own products.

My own experience tells me that budget fibre-wad cartridges may well benefit from the use of a slightly tighter choke in the same way that top-of-the-range clay cartridges, almost all of which are plastic wadded, may well throw tighter patterns than you might expect. The difference is only really noticeable on the most testing of clay targets, but may well separate the podium positions.

Consumers like choice and manufacturers understand this. What we have to do as shooters is benefit from the experience of seasoned Shots, both clay and game, most of whom find a combination they have full confidence in and stick with it. That confidence can only be gained by finding out exactly what your





chosen combination is doing by using a pattern plate. Shooting takes an enormously complicated calculation: trying to hit a target 40 yards away, doing 40mph, with a moving gun, throwing a shot column at 900mph. When broken down like this, it is a wonder we ever hit anything. The US military had serious problems trying to get a missile protection system to replicate this calculation.

Remove the variables

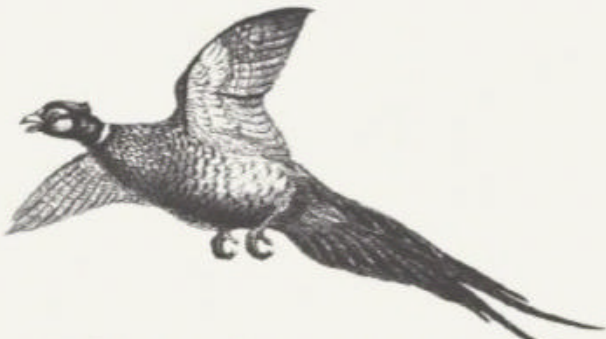
The trick is to simplify it as much as possible. This then allows nature’s most astonishing computer – your brain – to do the maths for you. When you remove as many variables as possible from the equation you can’t blame the equipment when you miss – it was working for you last week after all. Using a consistent recipe means you are far more likely to solve the problem by looking to your footwork, gun-mount, timing and relaxation. The problem almost always lies in one of these areas.

Does choke matter? As we have seen it is more complicated than that. Once you have found a combination you have confidence in, stick with it and leave the chokes alone. 🦅



Choke is an even greater consideration for wildfowlers who are using steel shot

Sporting clay shooters can adapt multichokes according to the targets they face



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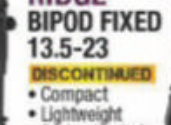
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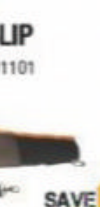
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One for bait, two for joy



DR MIKE SWAN
IS HEAD OF
EDUCATION
AND THE
SOUTHERN
REGIONAL
ADVISER FOR
THE GAME
& WILDLIFE
CONSERVATION
TRUST

With the spring comes the need to control magpies and other corvids that eat eggs and chicks – and the most effective method is the Larsen trap

Larsen traps are such a tradition that it is hard to believe that they were not known in the UK only 30 years ago. Invented by a Danish gamekeeper, a few made their way across the North Sea but the knowledge to make them work did not filter through. One of those original Larsens, complete with its maker's label, sat around in the predation control demo area at the GWCT's HQ when I started working there in 1982. It was quietly rotting away and merely given passing reference as "a Danish magpie trap" when shown to visitors.

The trap had a decoy compartment and two catchers but no one knew the significance of the live decoy. It was our keeper, Malcolm Brockless, who realised that the decoy would work by causing a territory owner to try to drive it away and reported the first success using it on Salisbury Plain. My colleague Jonathan Reynolds gets the credit for developing the trap, field testing it in the spring of 1989, then co-ordinating widespread testing by gamekeepers the following year.

Magpies and crows are intensely territorial, with each pair defending

its patch so that it can exploit its resources to raise a brood. Place your trap and its decoy in the territory of an established pair and the "owners" will soon be along to try to evict the intruder, hopefully getting caught in the process. GWCT research, headed by Jonathan, showed Larsens are 12 to 15 times more effective with a decoy compared with just a bait, as well as being far more target-specific.

This point about target specificity is crucial to widespread acceptance.

The co-ordinated testing showed about a one per cent non-target rate across more than 10,000 captures by hundreds of keepers. But the key point here is that this is due to the live decoy. Simply baiting a Larsen results in attracting almost anything that might be interested in the bait, as well as resulting in far fewer captures.

Clearly, using a live decoy brings a big responsibility. As well as being morally obliged to look after any animal in our care properly, we also

OPEN GENERAL LICENCES

All control of crows and magpies is under open general licence. These licences are issued by the devolved administrations, so they are different between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. You do not need to hold a licence, nor apply for one, though in Scotland Larsen users must be registered with the police.



A sign like this might persuade people not to free your decoy

Wherever you are, you are legally obliged to abide by the licence conditions, so I strongly suggest that you download a copy of the relevant licence from the relevant government website and read it carefully. To be extra sure, go on one of the GWCT's half-day training courses – you will learn some new tips in the process.

AN EARLY START

Every year in May I receive calls from people who are fed up watching magpies hammering the nesting songbirds in their garden. They have heard that a Larsen trap is the answer, and they want to know how it works and where to get a decoy. This is my moment to disappoint a succession of people, as I try gently to explain that they have missed the boat. By mid-May the worst of the damage is done and there is also the dilemma of leaving magpie chicks to starve if you trap their parents.

One of the key points in Larsen trapping is that a late March start allows you to mop up your resident pairs before they start to nest. The incomers that follow are non-breeders looking for a territory and they, in turn, can easily be caught before there are any dependents. Having explained this to many non-shooting audiences, I find that this point is crucial to converting many people who are sceptical, or even anti, into supporters of the cause.

have legal obligations under the Animal Welfare Act 2005. This is reinforced by the conditions on the open general licences that allow us to use Larsens (*see box, below left*). We are obliged to provide appropriate food, adequate shelter, a perch and water at all times.



Using a 600ml rabbit drinker ensures a clean and healthy water supply for the captive

Soaked kibbles of complete diet dog food provide a well-balanced feed for the decoy bird



After much experimentation, I now stick exclusively to soaked kibbles of complete diet dog food. This is simple, clean and nutritionally balanced; my measure of success is that my decoys are still fit and well when I cull them at the end of a three-month Larsen trapping season. I am now entirely converted to providing water in 600ml rabbit drinkers, which ensure that water

you set them. With no wooden frame, they are much less likely to be seen – therefore less likely to be interfered with – as well as being harder to vandalise. The weldmesh is less scratchy than wire netting so it is kinder to both decoy and captive.

I rarely leave a Larsen trap in place for more than two days. If I have not caught by then, I probably won't, so moving to a new site is best. If I know

“GWCT research showed Larsens are 12 to 15 times more effective with a decoy compared with just a bait”

cannot be contaminated with either food or faeces.

Most Larsens come with a perch built in and this is essential to prevent the decoy from pining away. As far as shelter is concerned, the trap should have a roof over the perch for both shade and to keep off rain, but I always try to add to this by siting my trap in the lee of a hedge, tree, wall or other structure.

Adventurous

The original Larsen had a wooden frame, clad in simple wire mesh. While this works well, times have changed and I now only use all-weldmesh traps. These traps come in two parts; a pair of catchers and a separate decoy compartment. This makes them far easier to carry around so you end up being a bit more adventurous about where

there is a crow or magpie to be caught, I'll perhaps move the trap a short distance, but otherwise it is off to a new site. A bird that dances round the trap but won't go in is frustrating, but it will usually get caught either by a short move or a two-day rest before moving the trap back.

Another great thing about Larsens is that they work best during the period of highest damage. When run properly, they remove an annual “harvest” of crows and magpies, allowing our game – and a range of other birds from curlew to song thrushes – to be more productive. Twenty-plus years of records on my own shoot show that I take roughly the same number of corvids each year, so I'm doing no long-term harm to the population of either species. This is the real mark of sustainability. 🐦

It's time to steal a March

You may have to wait a little longer to plant your game crops, but there is plenty you can do now in preparation, advises Liam Bell

With the exception of triticale and some other spring cereals – which can be drilled as soon as the ground is dry enough to work without making a mess – there aren't really any game crops to be planted for at least another five to six weeks. Having said that, before the pre-planting rush there is stuff that you can do now, which can make a difference to how your crop grows, matures and ultimately holds birds.

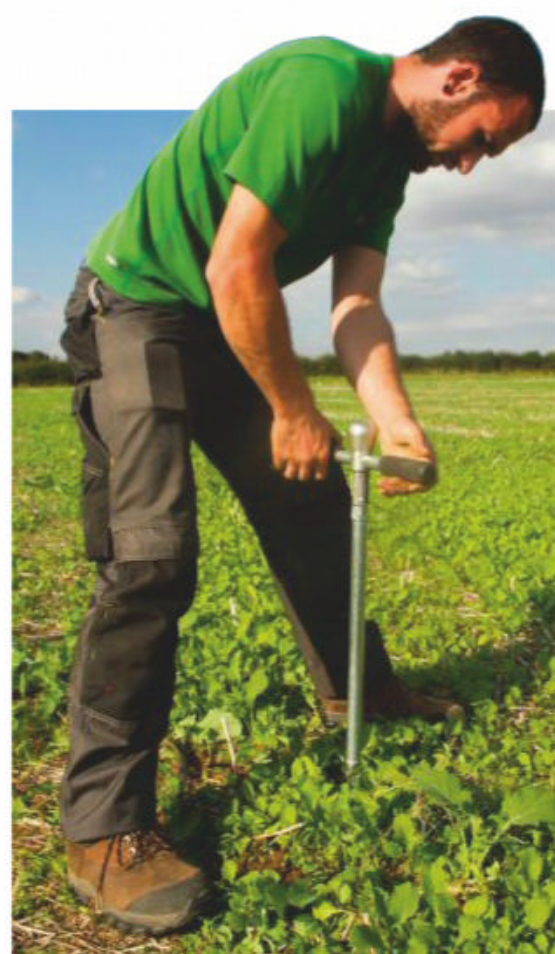
Any hedge cutting you had to do should have been done by the end of February for you to stay within the law. Don't be tempted to do otherwise. We cut ours every second year. Cutting yearly seems a bit unnecessary and is more expensive, and three years a little long between cuts. At three years some hedges are 10ft to 12ft tall and take some cutting back. They take longer to recover and can become thin and draughty at the bottom. At two years they have provided berries for a winter, are still windproof and don't take much getting back in order.

Hedges aside, clearing fallen branches and cutting up trees that have fallen across access routes should be done now. Anything that needs burning can be pushed up and sorted while you can drive on the crops, without having to worry about compacting ground that has already been worked down.

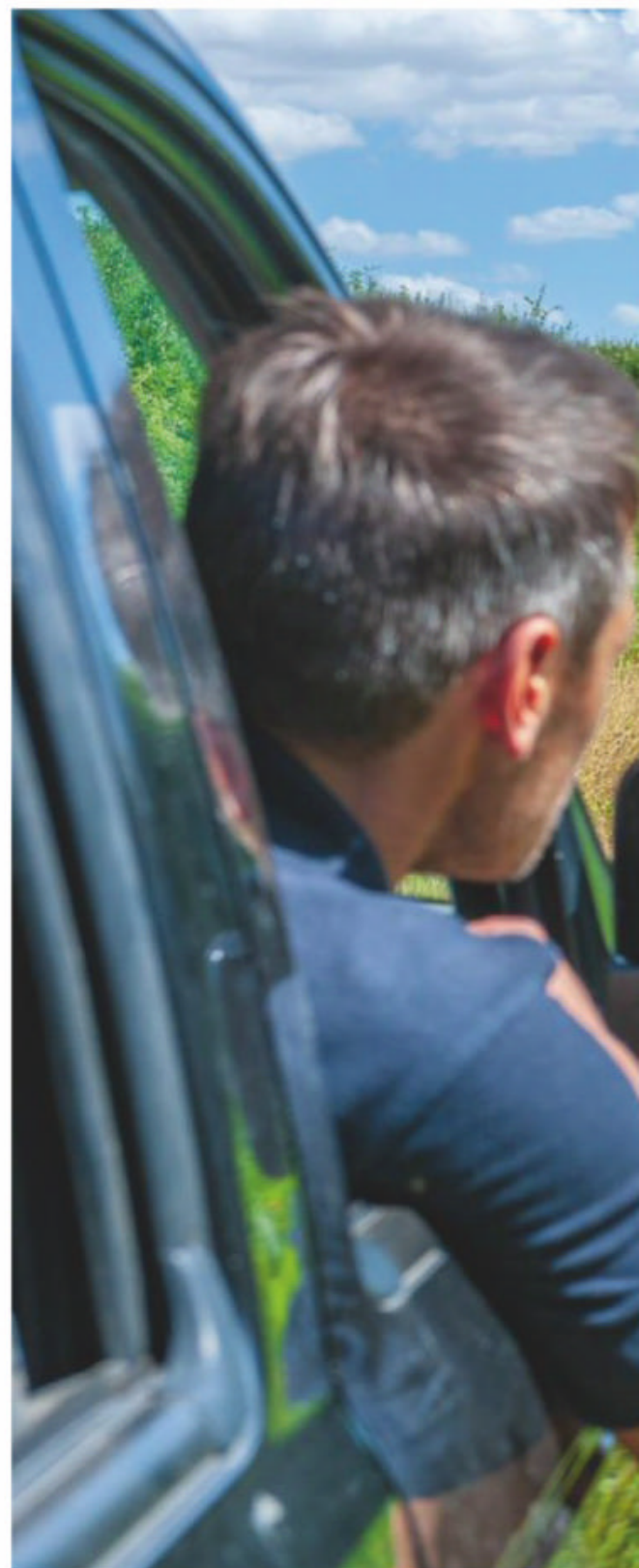
Food and shelter

Any topping off that needs doing can be left until the end of the month. There is no rush and very little to be gained from doing it any earlier. Doing it too early takes away useful shelter from both farmland birds and pheasants and partridges when they need it most. Birds that have been relying on the crops since last autumn will still be feeding in them and using them for cover until the weather improves and they start to spread out.

Failed crops that have been taken over by grass, those that have patches of thistles and docks in them and patches of new ground that are in grass or very dirty can be sprayed



It is worth having your soil analysed by the professionals as it is a complicated process



Raising the pH of your soil might result in it needing less fertiliser and therefore save you money

off and left. However, do make sure you pick the right day; March winds are great for pigeon flighting but no good for spraying.

You can test the soil to find out what the pH is and to see if you need to add lime. How much lime you will need to put on – if you need to put on any at all – will depend on where you are. We put lime on every five to six years because our soil is quite acidic. A friend of mine in Wiltshire grows great game crops and doesn't put any on at all.

Lime and pH

A good rule of thumb is that for every tonne of lime you put on per acre, you will raise the pH of the soil by about one point. On some soils a tonne per acre will only raise it half a point, on others more, which is why it is important to get it tested. Ideally, you

“Make sure you pick the right day; March winds are great for pigeon flighting but no good for spraying”

want the pH to be about seven but don't be tempted to overdo the liming if the pH is really low. Two tonnes per acre is about as much as the soil will take; if it needs more, wait a year and put some more on.

Kale and other crops will struggle if the pH is much lower than 5.5. If it is – and you don't think you are going to be able to get it high enough to grow what you want – plant something else. Top the lime up again next year, recheck the pH and have a rethink. What you plant might not be your first choice of crop, but at least you'll have something, which will be better than no crop at all.

Testing is also a useful guide to soil fertility, but the more in-depth tests are best done by professionals. The pH testing is fairly straightforward; soil analysis is more complicated. It will give you a steer on both fertiliser requirements and mineral deficiencies. Not only will it help you grow better crops, but it will also probably save you money on fertiliser.

Many of us only put the standard recommended amounts of fertiliser on our ground as a compound, regardless of whether the soil and crop actually need it. Soil-testing results ensure you only put on what is needed and the savings in fertiliser costs will – in most cases – more than cover the cost of the tests. When you have done as much as you can with the ground, start ringing round to get the fertiliser and seed ordered.

Odd corners

An exact acreage of crop to help work out the tonnage of fertiliser and the amount of seed you need would be fantastic. But most of us have odd corners, uneven edges of fields and triangles to contend with, so we have to make do with an educated guess.

I always go slightly high on both because I find that, even with modern fertilisers, spinners and drills, there is still some overlap when the game crop isn't a standard shape or size. It is far better to have some left over than having to do a mad dash to the seed merchant or get a special delivery sent round if you run out before you have finished drilling.

If you do have spare fertiliser, it is fairly easy to trade it with a farmer for wheat, or do a deal to swap it for more of the same next year. Leftover seed, providing it is stored properly, can be kept and mixed in with next year's.

Fertiliser prices are fairly well set and unless you can forward buy when it is cheap – and have somewhere to store it – there isn't usually a lot of difference in price between firms.

Seed prices are much the same. The only thing I would advise you to do is to buy your seed from a firm that specialises in game crops, knows what it is talking about and is easy to get hold of for follow-up advice. 🐾

Apart from triticale and kale there are no game crops to be planted yet





Clumber spaniels had a good year, with 280 puppies registered

Face it, it's bad news

Brachycephalic breeds are more and more popular, for the first time overtaking the Labrador. Have we gone mad, asks David Tomlinson



HAS THE DOG-BUYING

British public gone barking mad? Last year, as was widely predicted,

the French bulldog became Britain's most popular pedigree breed, ousting the Labrador from the top spot it has held for many years. According to the Kennel Club 36,785 French bulldogs were registered in 2018, compared with 36,526 Labradors.

Curiously, registrations for both Labradors and third-placed cockers (23,927) were slightly up in 2018 compared with 2017. The English bulldog appeared in the top five for the first time in 2018 with 10,665 registered, outnumbering the fifth-placed English springer on 10,152. Not far behind, on 9,742, comes another flat-faced breed, the pug.

For anyone with the slightest interest in dog welfare, the remarkable rise in popularity of the brachycephalic (flat-faced) breeds is deeply worrying. These dogs, especially as puppies, have a certain cute appeal but there is no escaping the fact that they are malformed.

A dog needs a proper muzzle to enable it to breathe properly, something that a wheezing bulldog clearly can't do. The list of ailments these dogs suffer from is long and depressing. Apart from lack of breath, their short faces mean overlapping teeth, leading to decay and gum disease.

The struggle for breath puts a strain on the animal's heart, while

“The puppies have a certain cute appeal but there is no escaping the fact that they are malformed”

the prominent eyes readily develop ulcers. Few French or English bulldogs are able to give birth naturally, with the great majority of puppies born by Caesarean section.

I could go on but this is a gundog column, so I will turn instead to the

Kennel Club's annual registration figures. Intriguingly, several of the gundog breeds had modest increases in registrations, mostly reflecting popularity as pets or in the show ring rather than in the shooting field.

I've still yet to see a *bracco Italiano* working on a shoot day, yet 165 were registered last year, compared with only four German longhaired pointers, a good-looking dog with real working ability.

Top gundog

It wasn't a great year for our native gundog breeds. Clumbers did relatively well, with 280 puppies registered, but field spaniels only managed a modest 48 and Sussex spaniels 34. Such desperately low figures do not bode well. But the Irish water spaniel (IWS) is on a roll, with 111 registrations last year compared with 69 the year before. The fact that an IWS was the top gundog at Crufts this year won't do the breed any harm (*News*, 20 March).

There wasn't much change in the numbers of pointers and setters

DAVID'S VIEWPOINT

BUTTERFLIES AND MOTHS

A papillon takes the best in show title for the first time

For years Crufts was simply Britain's biggest dog show but the introduction of pet passports — allowing dogs from around the world to compete — has changed it into a major international event. The fact that this year's best in show was a Belgian-owned dog chosen by a Swedish judge says it all. If you read some of the gloomy post-Brexit forecasts it seems that everything will change by 2020, with no dogs from EU countries allowed to take part, but I doubt this will happen.

The best in show dog was, for the first time, a papillon, a toy breed that has its origins in Belgium and France — both countries claim it as a native. It is often called a toy spaniel but its pricked ears don't make it look much like a spaniel, though there is also a drop-eared version

that is much more spaniel-like. The latter is called a *phalène*, French for night moth — papillon is French for butterfly — and both types can occur in the same litter. The *phalène* came before the papillon. These little dogs have a long history and feature in many Old Masters paintings, generally as lap dogs.

I was delighted to see that Richard Mace won the Northesk Memorial Trophy (for the best in gamekeepers' classes) at Crufts with his handsome golden retriever bitch, *Purbarn A Breeze Down River* (Breeze). Richard has long been a staunch supporter of the BASC gamekeepers' rings, entering every year with his working golden retrievers. Some years ago I spent a day on the Welsh shoot that Richard kept, so I saw at first-hand his golden retrievers at work: they were impressive. Richard and Breeze also won the BASC John Anderton Rose Bowl for the best AV gundog owned by a retired gamekeeper.

Breeze is jointly owned by Richard with his wife Jen Frankland-Mace. Apart from golden retrievers, Richard and Jen also work and breed what they call Chocdrop



Breeze wins the Northesk Trophy at Crufts

spaniels, a well-established cross between Sussex and working cocker spaniels. I've also seen the Chocdrops in action: it is clear that the infusion of vigorous cocker lines transforms the Sussex into a proper working spaniel. The Chocdrop is living proof of how fresh blood could transform the Sussex.

Email: dhtomlinson@btinternet.com

registered, nor for most of the HPR breeds, though Brittanys and large Munsterlanders continue to decline and vizslas and wirehaired vizslas to increase, albeit modestly. With only 70 registrations the curlycoated retriever is just about hanging on but remains in deep trouble.

There is no distinction drawn between the working and show strains of each breed with the Kennel Club. My guess is that the majority of Labradors and probably cockers are show bred, but I suspect that most of the English springers are from working stock. Nor does the Club have any statistics for the number of cross-bred puppies, such as cockerpoos, Labradoodles and sprockers, born last year.

To get a more realistic idea of breed popularity, I turned to Pets4Homes, one of the leading free online sales sites for dogs, as well cats, horses and even hamsters. Based on adverts placed on the website, the top 10 gundogs in 2018 were (in descending order) cocker spaniel, Labrador, English springer, golden retriever, Hungarian vizsla, Weimaraner, German shorthaired pointer, (English) pointer, German wirehaired pointer and American cocker spaniel.

Pets4Homes provides an interesting analysis of its figures. For example, of its cocker spaniel adverts, 3,620 were for Kennel Club-registered animals but 5,315 were for unregistered dogs or puppies. The average advertised price of the former was £788, for the latter a more modest £594. With English springers the respective figures were 1,363 registered puppies and litters, and 1,448 non-registered, with the average prices £611 and £499.

Status

The website explains that “pedigree status is not hugely important to many springer buyers, and for some working roles, some people actively choose non-pedigrees, or don't assign a lot of value to pedigree paperwork”. As one who has always owned non-registered spaniels I would agree with that. Pedigree papers are essential if you want to compete with your dog but have no other great advantage.

Pets4Homes also lists what it calls the most popular hybrid-type dogs in 2018. Number one was the cockerpoo, followed by the cavapoo, Labradoodle, sprocker and cavachon. During 2018, 9,633 individual adverts were placed for cockerpoos, more

than the combined number of all the other hybrid dogs combined.

Prices were high, too, with the average £801. The dog's popularity can be judged from the fact that Pets4Homes hosted more advertisements for cockerpoos than it did for either pure-bred Labradors or cocker spaniels.

Statistics can be misleading, but however you interpret them, dog ownership in 21st century Britain is already radically different from the last century. How the future will shape our traditional gundog breeds is intriguing, but change now seems inevitable.

The English springer spaniel retained its number five slot in the Kennel Club's top 10



The experts

THE ULTIMATE SHOOTING QUIZ TEAM



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➡ MAT MANNING

Airgunner and journalist from the West Country



➡ BRUCE POTTS

Shooting Times rifle reviewer and stalker



➡ DAVID TOMLINSON

Highly regarded writer and ornithologist



➡ LIAM BELL

NGO chairman, Shropshire gamekeeper and keen wildfowler



➡ GRAHAM DOWNING

Shooting consultant and sporting author



➡ CHRIS DE CANI

Riverkeeper, with specialist knowledge of chalkstreams



➡ TONY BUCKWELL

Veterinary surgeon with a special interest in Gundogs



➡ TONY JACKSON

A game shot, keen stalker and former editor of *Shooting Times*



➡ TOM PAYNE

Professional shooting instructor and avid pigeon shooter



➡ JEREMY HUNT

Runs Fenway Labradors and a professional gundog trainer



➡ TIM MADDAMS

Former head chef at River Cottage and runs a shoot in Devon



➡ SIMON WHITEHEAD

Author, professional ferreter and rabbit controller



➡ IAIN WATSON

Keen stalker and senior CIC international trophy judge

Contact the team

Email: stanswers@ti-media.com

By post: Shooting Times, Pinehurst 2, Farnborough Business Park, Hants GU14 7BF

The pochard's colouring is similar to that of a wigeon, hence the name diving wigeon. They were also known as dunbirds



The mysterious dunbird

➡ WILDFOWLING

Q Looking through a Victorian game book, I came across several references to diving wigeon or dunbirds. Do you have any idea of what species these birds might have been?

A Wildfowlers had their own regional names for the various species of duck they bagged and these can be confusing, to say the least. However, a diving wigeon or dunbird is almost certainly

a pochard. The pochard's colouring is not dissimilar to that of a wigeon, hence the name diving wigeon.

Dunbird was used for the pochard in a number of regions, but it was also a name used indiscriminately by many old fowlers for any small duck that they couldn't identify specifically. The diaries of Colonel Peter Hawker record the fact that he shot 64 dunbirds during his lifetime. The diary brackets dunbirds as pochard, but it seems highly likely that Col Hawker used the name for any small duck he didn't, or couldn't, identify. **DT**

Jammed gun – what to do?

FIREARMS LAW

Q If a loaded rifle or shotgun were not to fire and the bolt/action will not function, what should I do? It is likely that I would be on private land, but the journey home with the still-loaded gun would be by car on public roads. I only ask because this happened to a friend of mine when his 12-bore semi-automatic was dropped in mud; it was resolved in a farmyard with a powerful hose pipe.

A It is always good policy to carry a set of jointed rods in the car to deal with any blockages – they

may save your day's shooting or someone else's.

In any case, Section 19 of the Firearms Act 1968 only creates an offence if someone has a loaded firearm in a public place "without lawful authority or reasonable excuse". It must be reasonable to take a firearm with a round jammed up the spout to a place – home, a gunsmith or similar – where it can be removed safely. That is a reasonable course of action, so no offence is committed.

Any potential prosecution would fail the CPS "public interest" test and if it did make court would be thrown out by the judge as "an abuse of the process". **BH**

Big drop in rabbit numbers – where have they gone?

PEST CONTROL

Q There appears to be a big drop in the number of rabbits on the farm where I shoot. They just don't seem to be around at the normal time that I walk around the land. Why could this be? The farmer is a good friend and nobody else shoots there.

A A number of people have spoken to me recently about a lack of rabbits. This may be the result of disease, such as myxomatosis or rabbit viral haemorrhagic disease, though in this case you could probably expect to

see carcasses or sick rabbits. Even if you are not seeing rabbits, make sure you are checking for signs of them, such as fresh scrapes and droppings. Also, try sitting out late in the evening or in the morning as it gets light, because if they are regularly shot at, rabbits may simply not be showing themselves during the day.

If you have a rimfire rifle, use it either from a portable high seat or with a bipod if you can find a vantage point with a safe backstop. If you have access to a thermal imager, walk around the fields at night with it and you may be surprised at the number of rabbits you see. **GD**



If they are regularly shot at, rabbits may simply not be showing themselves during the day

Native Britain

Plants, flowers and fungi of Great Britain at a glance

Latin name: *Coprinellus micaceus*
Common name: Glistening inkcap
Other names: Mica inkcap



How to spot it and where to find it: This common mushroom really does glisten; the egg-shaped caps are pleated and covered in tiny white granules – the remains of a veil – that look like flakes of salt. The caps are yellowish brown when young, turning a greyish brown as they age and open out. They are also hygrophanous, meaning they change colour when they are wet. The stem is white and delicate with no ring. They grow in the spring in large clusters around the base of trees.

Interesting facts: When the white gills of this mushroom mature, they deliquesce, turning the underside of the cap into inky black goo – hence the name. The inkcap is edible but degenerates rapidly when picked so must be used within an hour. It has little flavour and is best cooked with other mushrooms. The pleated caps allow heavy metals such as lead and cadmium and other pollutants, so don't pick any that grow near the roadside. The glistening inkcap has been found to contain the highest concentration of potassium out of 34 edible fungi species that were tested. Due to its habit of growing on dead wood hidden from view under the ground, it has been said that the glistening inkcap marks the graves of dead trees.

Essential airgun kit

AIRGUNNING

Q I have recently taken up airgunning and have a birthday looming, so I plan to drop a few hints about gear I need. Can you suggest a few kitbag essentials that won't break the bank?

A I don't like to carry a huge amount of gear when I'm out with my airgun, but there are a few items that can prove useful, and a rangefinder is the first one I would recommend. Owing to the curved trajectory of an airgun pellet, it is important to know how far away your target is so you can make correct adjustments to your aim. The fastest and most accurate way to do that is with a quick ping of a laser rangefinder.

For something a little more affordable, I would suggest a lightweight hide net or a vacuum flask. Having a decent hide can make a big difference to your results in the woods, and unproductive hours spent inside it are much easier to endure when you have a mug of hot tea or coffee to hand. **MM**



A rangefinder and a vacuum flask can make airgunning more productive and enjoyable

How long to hang a deer?

STALKING

Q How long should a deer be hung before it gets cut up? Is it best to leave it hanging in the skin or with its skin off?

A There really is no simple answer. The received wisdom is that it is better to hang a deer in its jacket; that is, with its skin on. That is because the deer is a lean animal and the carcass will dry out excessively if hung after it is skinned.

The issue of how long to hang it for will be influenced by a number of factors. Is it to be hung in a controlled, chilled environment? In an ideal world, a carcass for human consumption will be hung in a controlled environment in a chiller at a monitored temperature.

The age of the animal and the manner of its death will also need to be considered. Did the animal die instantly, or was it wounded and followed up prior to despatch? The reality is that if the animal was stressed at the point of death, the quality of the carcass will be impacted. Was the animal bled properly? Was it allowed to cool and "set up" before being chilled or did it go straight into the chiller?

What species is it? How well or badly has it been shot? If the latter, has it been properly trimmed and cleaned up? How well hung do you like your venison?

All of these factors will impact on the ideal hanging time.

It is perhaps best to remember that the hanging carcass needs to be monitored and timings adjusted if a quality product is to be achieved. **IW**



A carcass for human consumption should be hung in a controlled environment in a chiller unit and monitored

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The law on tail docking

GUNDOGS

Q My working spaniel bitch is due to give birth to her first litter of puppies in the near future. I would like to have them all docked because I have seen injuries in the field to undocked working spaniels. What is the legal position today on docking?

A Current legislation states that only veterinary surgeons can carry out this procedure. However, vets have also been advised by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, their governing body, that tail docking purely for cosmetic reasons would lead to disciplinary proceedings.

Country vets who deal with working gundogs are well aware of the damage that can be caused to an undocked tail, notably in spaniels, so will usually undertake the procedure if they are aware the puppies will be going to working homes. Dew claws can still be removed too, because they can be badly torn in working dogs. **TJ**



Working gundogs with undocked tails are at risk of serious injury, particularly spaniels

What is a sabot round?

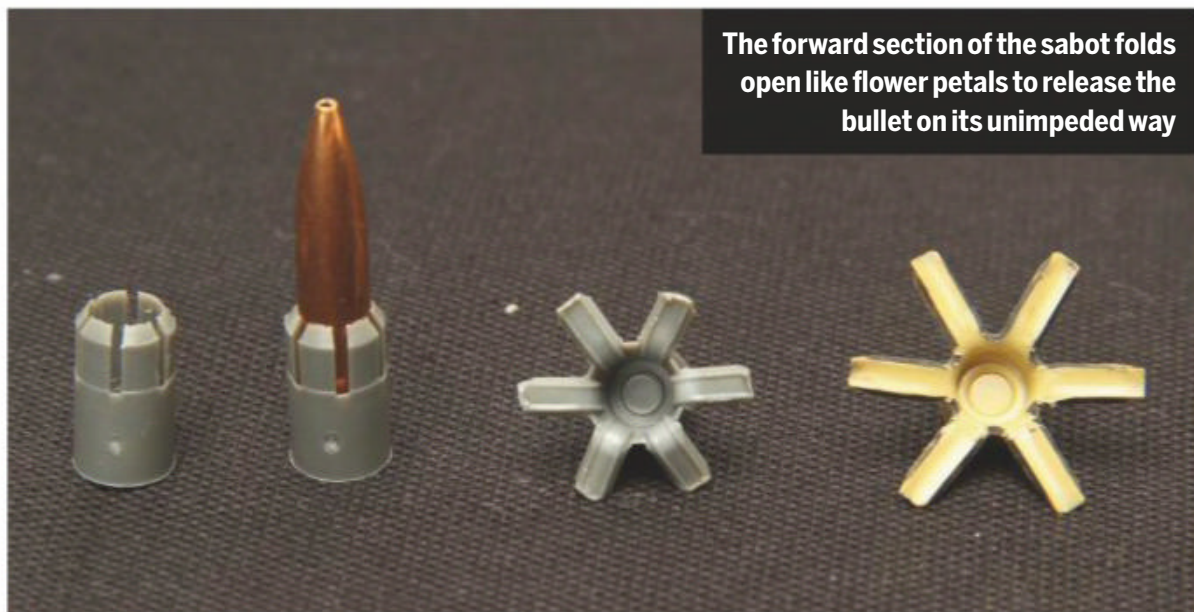
RIFLES

Q I am told a sabot round would be handy in my .308 Win rifle for shooting vermin, but I am not sure what it is. Can you please enlighten me?

A This is an interesting alternative to using your deer rifle as a fox gun, as a sabot – pronounced “say-bo” or “shoe” in French – is a discarding casing around a smaller projectile that fits your existing calibre rifle. For instance, a .224-diameter bullet encased in a plastic sabot with a diameter of .308 will fire in any .30 calibre rifle such as your .308 Win.

Sabots guide the bullet down the barrel but are discarded after the projectile leaves the muzzle – the forward section of the sabot folds open to release the bullet. This method results in higher velocities than are possible from the standard calibre with lighter bullets. However, accuracy is no better, and you cannot fit a sound moderator because the sabot will damage it.

Remington used to offer .30-30, .308 and .30-06 sabot rounds but no longer does so. The only route is via reloading, and obtaining sabots now is tricky because they come from the US and require a good knowledge of reloading. In truth it is better to have a separate .22 centrefire rifle for vermin and foxes. **BP**



Bird of the week by Graham Appleton

JAY

As the new breeding season approaches, jays melt away. No longer are they the busy acorn collectors of the autumn, boldly flying hither and yon to store their finds. Now it is their time to be furtive; working the hedgerows and woodlands on the hunt for birds' eggs and chicks. Their own nests are usually well hidden, tucked neatly into the fork of a tree or up against the trunk in something like a clump of ivy. Clutch size can be variable, with sometimes as



The jay becomes more furtive as the breeding season approaches

many as eight eggs, though four to six is more common. Pairs of jays are highly territorial and there is quite a lot of noise at the nest-building stage, before all goes quiet once incubation starts. Adults sit tightly even when the nest is approached, but become more garrulous – as one might expect from their Latin name of *Garrulus glandarius* – when defending their growing youngsters from potential predators.

How do you use a T-bar?

➤ FERRETING

Q What is a T-bar and how do you use it?

A A T-bar is an instrument used to probe the earth to find a rabbit warren. Due to the vast array of substrates we ferret in, from neat sand to thick clay, digging can sometimes be a treacherous task. Many years ago, I was shown the merits of using a probe while digging and have used one ever since. I use a simple T-bar of around 2ft in length and the thickness of a pen with a rounded, soft edge.

It is used when your ferret has been located and you have started digging the hole. Once near the mark, push the bar into the ground in the direction you think the ferret is located. As soon as the rounded tip hits fresh air it has no friction and falls through, highlighting the tunnel.

T-bars are especially helpful when your ferret moves away, you no longer have a reliable signal and you want your rabbit. It takes the guesswork out of your dig and is a lot safer for beginners as it stops them from being over-eager with the spade and prevents any potential accidents with your ferrets when breaking through. **SW**



A T-bar takes the guesswork out of your dig, allowing you to retrieve your hard-won rabbit safely

The trick to treats

➤ GUNDOG TRAINING

Q I am confused by the many different attitudes towards using treats as a training aid. I have started to use some reward-based training with my six-month-old Labrador, but I am worried that I may overdo things and she might lose focus on the work because she is too fixated on the treats.

A You are right to recognise that there are a lot of different views on the use of treats. Many trainers would not dream of providing any form of treat-based reward or enticement as part of their training, while others believe it is an integral part of how they make progress in the early stages. I think it is the judicious use of treats – and at the appropriate stages of training – that holds the key.

My approach to training is all about creating a close bond between the dog and me, one based on trust and that engenders confidence as the dog progresses through the learning process. I use treats from a very early stage so that when a puppy is just playing around with its mates in the paddock and I whistle them up, they each get a tiny treat – usually a bit of biscuit and praise in plenty.

I use treats as part of the bond-building process early on. Likewise, when I start heel work, I will have a bit of dog biscuit in my hand to keep a dog's attention on me and to keep it close to me. You will never see me jaggging a lead to have to keep a puppy tight up to me. At the end of a training session I will reward a dog with a bit of dog biscuit – it's just something I like to do.

I would give a treat in the early stages of recall training as part of the encouragement process and to say "well done", but I do not use treats at any stage during retrieving work. When a puppy starts to retrieve and present a dummy I want it to have nothing else on its mind other than holding that dummy – that is the prize and the reward.

Use treats to encourage and to say thanks but be careful not to go on too long with treats during training sessions as the puppy progresses. You really do have to use your own judgement about when a kind word and a show of pleasure on your part is ample reward. **JH**



Breeds in focus

Belgian blue cow / 27 March

The Belgian blue is a beef breed noted for its rapid growth and its extreme double muscling, producing an abundance of lean meat. The double muscling is the result of a natural genetic

mutation: a mature bull looks as if it has been on a bodybuilding course. The muscling is a gross enlargement of individual muscle fibres and was once regarded as a deformity.

Butchers favour the carcasses, but pure-bred cows have great difficulty calving, so most calves have to be delivered by caesarean section.

Though known as the Belgian blue, the coat can be white, blue, pied or blue roan. In the 19th century British shorthorn bulls were imported to Belgium to improve the quality of the cattle. There is now a well-established British type of Belgian blue, with great emphasis placed on ease of calving and sound temperament.



The Belgian blue's coat can be white, blue, pied or blue roan

Pheasant breeding ratios

GAMEKEEPING

Q Could you tell me what cock-to-hen ratio is best to pen my pheasants at? It is currently 10:1.

A A 1:10 ratio of cock to hen pheasants can work OK, but it is a little on the high side. If it is a large, extensive pen and the birds are being flock mated I'd start at 1:7

or 1:8. By the time you have taken out the odd bullied or non-performing cock bird out, it will probably be nearer 1:8.5 to 1:9 anyway. Smaller individual pens of 10 hens will work well with a single cock, but work better if you allow a cock bird to every six hens. Stock selection is particularly important, as is care of the eggs and the incubation process, if you want fit, healthy chicks. **LB**



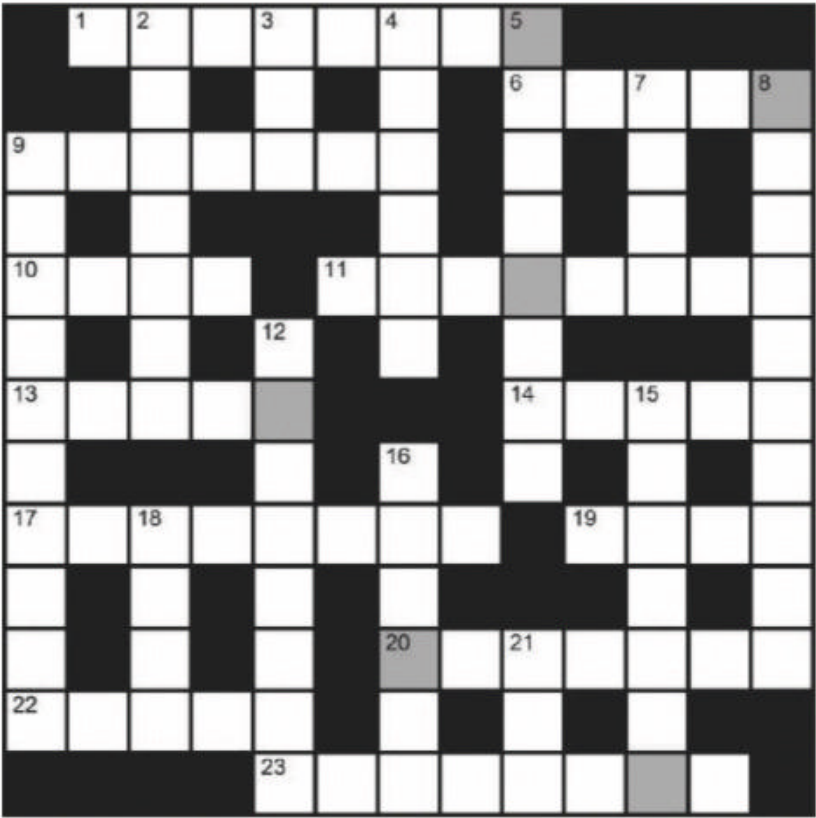
Stock selection is particularly important if you want fit, healthy chicks

Avoiding overseas disease

FISHING

Q I am hoping to go fishing in Norway, which has been on my bucket list for years. I am aware that there are some issues over the transference of fish diseases when fishing abroad. What can I do to ensure that I don't return from my overseas trip riddled with disease?

A Our island status protects us from several notifiable fish diseases present on the Continent. An outbreak of any of these notifiable fish diseases can only be treated by the termination of all aquatic life. In simple terms, the river is disinfected for several months. If you are fishing abroad and taking your own tackle, give it a good clean and make sure it is dry before you return home. For further advice regarding biosecurity when fishing abroad contact your local fishery officer or the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science. **CDC**



Crossword / Compiled by Eric Linden / 1397

Across

- 1 Teachers are curious about measures of land (8)
- 6 Tailed off, out east, on creek or river (5)
- 9 Decoy machine power source found in the bird cage (7)
- 10 Scope component from northern France? (4)
- 11 The Countryside campaign group, for example, leaves an allegiance (8)
- 13 Game was consumed somewhat threateningly (5)
- 14 The Turkish gunmaker should embrace heartless Lou (5)
- 17 Pellet specification changes are timed (8)
- 19 Climb irresponsibly inside a Fair Irish castle (4)
- 20 For field trial spectators, there's a spot of art (7)
- 22 Treasure the money up for grabs in competitive shooting (5)
- 23 On which to find many a wildfowler where Mr Heath's wandering (3,5)



Where might you find a game-shooting target?

Down

- 2 Both sides must be extremely succinct when an entire species is gone (7)
- 3 A gun component for one on foot (3)
- 4 Are they Holland & Holland guns or a sly alternative? (6)
- 5 A direct type of gun stock that's on hand (8)
- 7 Shoot birds out of the air when depressed (4)
- 8 Game-shooting targets reside next to an excavation site (4,6)
- 9 An example of ammunition mishandling often leading to compensation? (6,4)
- 12 Fashionable luxurious fabric means antlers are

covered (2,6)
15 A stagier variety of outdoor wear (7)
16 The International Gundog group reveal sporting division (6)
18 One who's not for hunting in the meantime (4)
21 A sights company are in the ballpark (3)

Due to unforeseen circumstances, we are unable to offer a prize for this week's crossword, but we hope you will still enjoying doing it just for fun. Look out for details of a new prize soon.

Solution 1395 / 13 March 2019
Across: 6. Quick-release 7. Auction 8. Creep 11. Bed 12. Waterloo 14. Kelmarsh 15. Pie 17. Stake 19. Bouquet 20. Spring-loaded
Down: 1. Minced 2. Skein 3. Seen 4. Carrera 5. Cere 6. Quad bikes 9. Protected 10. FTCH 12. Worm 13. Smokers 15. Pounds 16. Yukon 18. Tusk 19. Bogs
HIDDEN WORD: COMBS



Gunroom

A “rook-and-rabbit” rifle was a peculiarly English little firearm that, in 19th-century Britain, became the well-to-do gentleman’s favourite



This 60-bore needlefire rifle's action was activated by the teardrop-shaped lever on the side

The history of firearms technology is littered with short-lived ideas that some bright spark thought would catch on and make their fortune. All too often, these thoughts never came to fruition and those ideas were eventually consigned to history. One such firearm was the needlefire rook-and-rabbit rifle that enjoyed a brief flowering for about two decades in mid-19th century Britain.

The needlefire system was one of the first breechloaders to use a cartridge that combined all four elements that constitute ammunition: bullet, gunpowder, cartridge case and primer. It differed from a conventional breechloader in that the case was made of paper, which was consumed on firing. The breech either had a mechanical seal or an expanding rubber or leather washer. Rather than using a normal firing pin, needle guns used fine needles to penetrate the cartridge and cause the cap to detonate.

Adopted by the military

As the needlefire system was adopted by the military of Prussia, France and Italy, sporting gunmakers applied it to rifles and shotguns. A few shotguns and pistols that used it are known, but its use in civilian firearms was mainly applied to rifles.

A Belgian gunmaker called Jean-Jacques Rissack was granted a patent for needlefire firearms on 18 October 1850. He was clearly an ingenious chap as he was granted 22 other patents for firearms. The needlefire patent drawing shows a pistol with a screw-operated breech, whose self-contained cartridge was ignited by a short, stubby needle. Some Rissack patent pocket

pistols and pepperbox revolvers are known, but the system seems to have been used mostly for making rook-and-rabbit rifles.

Its principal application consisted of a small rifle with a hinged action that was locked by a quick thread breech plug. This was activated by a teardrop-shaped lever. The striker or “needle” was attached to the hammer nose, which ran through a hole in the breech-plug.

The cartridge was made of thin brass foil that incorporated a depression in the base containing fulminate of mercury with powdered glass to give friction. The projectile could be a round ball or pointed bullet, depending on the user’s fancy. The whole was covered in paper, often with a red or blue maker’s label glued on the base.

The cartridge was loaded into the breech and the plug locked by giving it

“The patent shows a pistol with a screw-operated breech, whose self-contained cartridge was ignited by a short needle”

a turn through about 45°. The hammer was cocked and when the trigger was pressed, the striker ran through the breechblock and crushed the fulminate, igniting it and firing the cartridge. There was no extractor: the shooter carried a small hook with which to fish out the empties. No fore-end was fitted either; the shooter rested his hand on the underside of the barrel.

The majority of Rissack rook-and-rabbit rifles seem to be made for the big Oxford Street gun retailer E. M. Reilly & Co. I don’t know who actually made them but it will

have been some jobbing gunmaker on the London or Birmingham trades.

It was not only Reilly who sold these little rifles; other gun retailers also offered them to their customers. An exceptional specimen came on to the market recently, retailed by John William Edge of Manchester. He was active at various addresses from 1827 to around 1864.

Potting bunnies

This delightful little rifle was clearly ordered by a well-to-do fellow who enjoyed potting a few bunnies or other small game. It was chambered for a 60-bore cartridge, which is about .42in calibre.

Its condition was impeccable; it looked like it had been taken out of Mr Edge’s shop yesterday. The Damascus twist barrel still had most of its original brown; the furniture

was charcoal blued to give a rich peacock-blue finish and the action’s colour case hardening showed the greys, blues and brown that look like a thundery sky.

The rook-and-rabbit rifle is a peculiarly English firearm that is not found in any other country. It lasted from about 1850 to the turn of the century when it was superseded by cheap American .22 rifles that were ballistically more effective. While it was made in percussion cap, rimfire and centrefire cartridges, needlefire examples are the rarest. 🐰

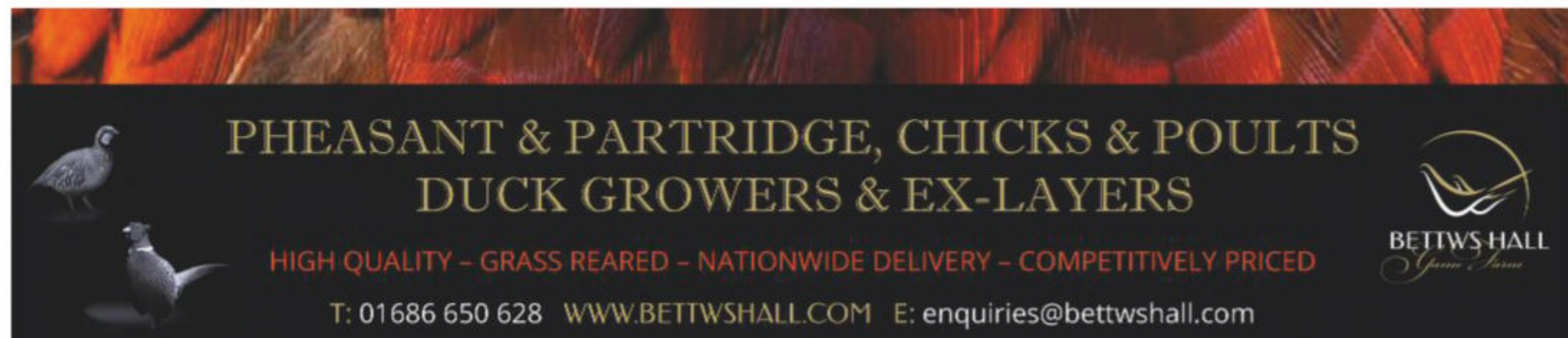
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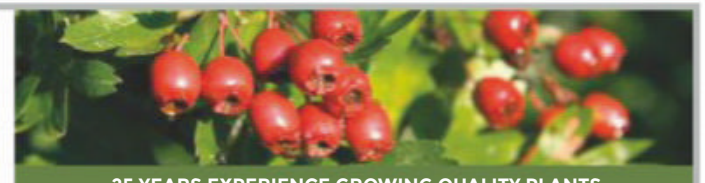


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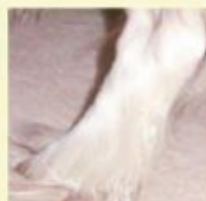
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Sharpshooter



More women are taking up shooting, which is excellent news for our sport but it is nothing new – even a Russian countess enjoyed the hunt

Women are vital to the future of shooting. Only a small proportion of certificate holders are female, but they represent a growing part of the shooting community. Their participation is essential – not least for the “normalisation” of shooting; opening it up as a sport for all.

Today, there are unprecedented opportunities for women to take up shooting. But it is interesting to note that certain women made their mark in shooting sports back in the days when it really was seen as a man’s sport.

Take the Marchioness of Breadalbane, for example. In late Victorian times she was a dauntless deer stalker, who once despatched six stags with six consecutive shots. Her book about her exploits on her family’s Scottish deer forest – *The High Tops of Black Mount*, published in 1907 – is a classic. It is sobering to realise that she climbed and crawled amid the peaks encumbered by an ankle-length tweed skirt.

Then there is Countess Edith Sollohub. I recently stumbled on her memoir, *The Russian Countess*, about life in pre-revolutionary Russia and her subsequent escape from the Bolshevik regime. It emerged that she was a keen shooter,

starting from the age of 14 when one of her greatest joys was to go out squirrel hunting on her own, equipped with a light rifle and a dog. Her love of pursuing every sort of game and wildfowl in the Russian wilderness is a recurring theme in the book.

Wolves were a key quarry and she explained her favourite method of hunting these wily beasts. After a good dinner and lots of black coffee – to keep the participants awake – the hunters would

“She climbed and crawled amid the peaks encumbered by an ankle-length tweed skirt”

set out on a moonlit night, taking a couple of horse-drawn sledges. These vehicles were low and flat with no seats but were filled with straw and equipped with a thick rug.

The leading sledge would take on board a suckling piglet, kept warm and snug in a blanket. The sledges would be driven along forest rides and the piglet would be patted or pinched gently. This action would provoke a series of squeals.

The Countess wrote: “Attracted by this noise, the wolves began to follow the sledge, at first at a considerable distance but then, as their numbers grew, they came ever closer until their green, luminous eyes could be seen like so many lights flickering in the dark.”

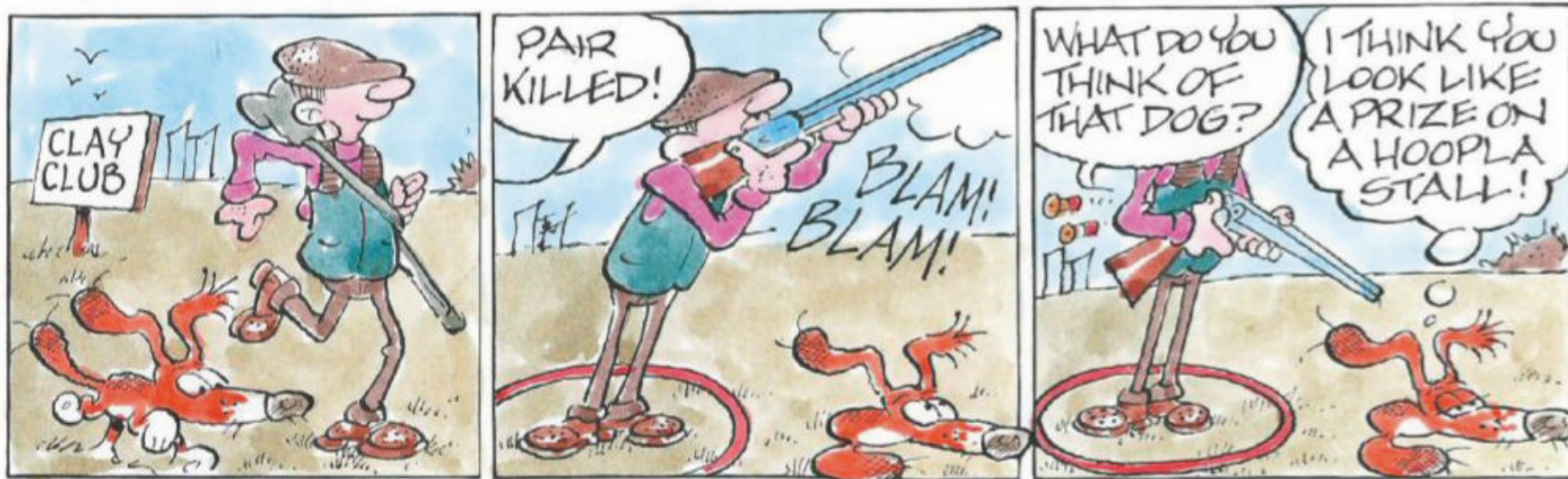
Not surprisingly, the horses often showed signs of nervousness and began to increase speed.

“Thus with the piglet squeaking, the moon shining and the horse going at a good pace, one only had to wait for the opportunity to get a good shot at the wolves as they approached the sledges... The fall of one wolf did not seem to affect the rest of the pack for any length of time, the ranks closed in quickly and the attack began again with increasing fury and tenacity.

“The situation could become serious if the sledge left the track or if it stopped in the mounds of fresh snow through which the horse could not pull it, or – and this was far worse – if the sledge overturned in sliding over an unnoticed hump or snow-covered tree trunk.”

I wonder what the intrepid Countess – who died in 1965 – would make of today’s technical outdoor clothing, mechanical vehicles, thermal-imaging sights and electronic predator calls. 🐾

DOG BY KEITH REYNOLDS



SHOOTING TIMES & COUNTRY MAGAZINE, ISSN 0037-4164, is published weekly, incorporating Shooting Magazine, Shooting Life, British Sportsman, The Angler’s News & Sea Fisher’s Journal and Field Sport, by TI Media Ltd, 3rd floor, 161 Marsh Wall, London, England E14 9AP, United Kingdom. © 2019 TI Media Ltd. Contributions are welcome but must be accompanied by a suitable stamped addressed envelope. Publication of accepted articles is not guaranteed, and the publishers will not be held liable for any manuscripts, photographs or other materials lost or damaged while in their possession, though every care will be taken. The Editor reserves the right to amend any such articles as necessary. Shooting Times & Country Magazine, as part of TI Media Ltd, is committed to supporting the editorial standards of Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, a TI Media Ltd company, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU Tel: +44 (0)20 378 79001. Printed by Walstead UK Ltd. Registered as a newspaper for transmission in the United Kingdom. Subscription rates for 52 issues: UK – £143. Priority Service (5-7 days): Europe – €234, ROW – £199. The US annual subscription price is \$305. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431. US Postmaster: Send address changes to SHOOTING TIMES & COUNTRY MAGAZINE, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at TI Media Ltd, 3rd floor, 161 Marsh Wall, London, England E14 9AP. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent. All prices include postage and packing. Enquiries and subscription orders: TI Media Ltd, PO Box 272, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH16 3FS. Cheques payable to TI Media Ltd. Tel: +44 (0)845 845 1231, fax +44 (0) 1444 445599.

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